EVERY STORY AN ACE

NOVEMBER

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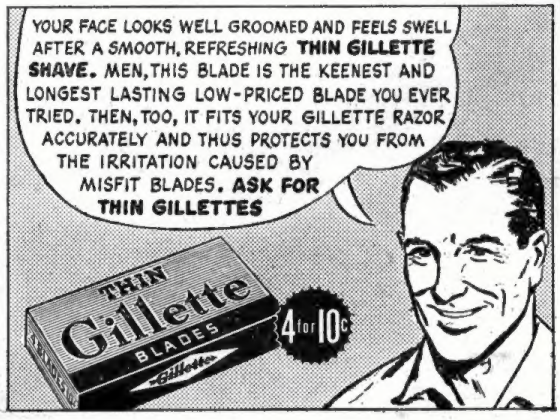
WESTERN ACES

BADMAN STEALS THE BIG SHOW

by J. EDWARD LEITHEAD

LUCK WAS WITH TOM WHEN...

ON VACATION, TOM MAHONEY IS SHOOTING THE LAST AND MOST DANGEROUS RAPIDS IN HIS LONG TRIP THROUGH MAD CANYON WHEN • • •



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WESTERN ACES

BADMAN STEALS THE BIG SHOW (Novelette)
J. EDWARD LEITHEAD 2
Vince Wycherly becomes a powdersmoke performer after an outlaw takes over the rodeo.

SHERIFF, HANG YOUR SON! . . . . . GLENN LOW 21
The corpse in the barber shop points the finger of guilt at the star-toter's younker.

LAST CHANCE FOR A TINHORN . . JOSEPH CHADWICK 29
That fake bonanza brings Dan Larrigan his come-uppance.

HELLION OF THE HIGHWAYS . . . . . NAT MCKELVEY 39
True story of the law's race to catch up with a notorious road agent.

SADDLE SNAKE VENOM . . . . . GUNNISON STEELE 43
The old lawman still savvies how to round up a renegade—and line his sixes!

THE DEVIL WALKS IN CARNEY TOWN (Novelette)
WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER 46
A Colt crusader comes to deliver a trigger text.

OWLHOOT MASQUERADER . . . . . WILSON L. COVERT 61
An avalanche and the faith of a pretty girl shows a longrider what to do with his loot.

NEW NOTCHES FOR OLD GUNS . . . . . GIFF CHESHIRE 71
Instead of getting a .45 job, he ends up as gun guard of a gospel tent.

DEATH REAPS A HOLSTER HARVEST (Novelette)
D. B. NEWTON 78
Syndicate man Red Cameron sows seeds of suspicion among the fruit growers and reaps hot lead from his own outfit.

Cover by Norman Saunders

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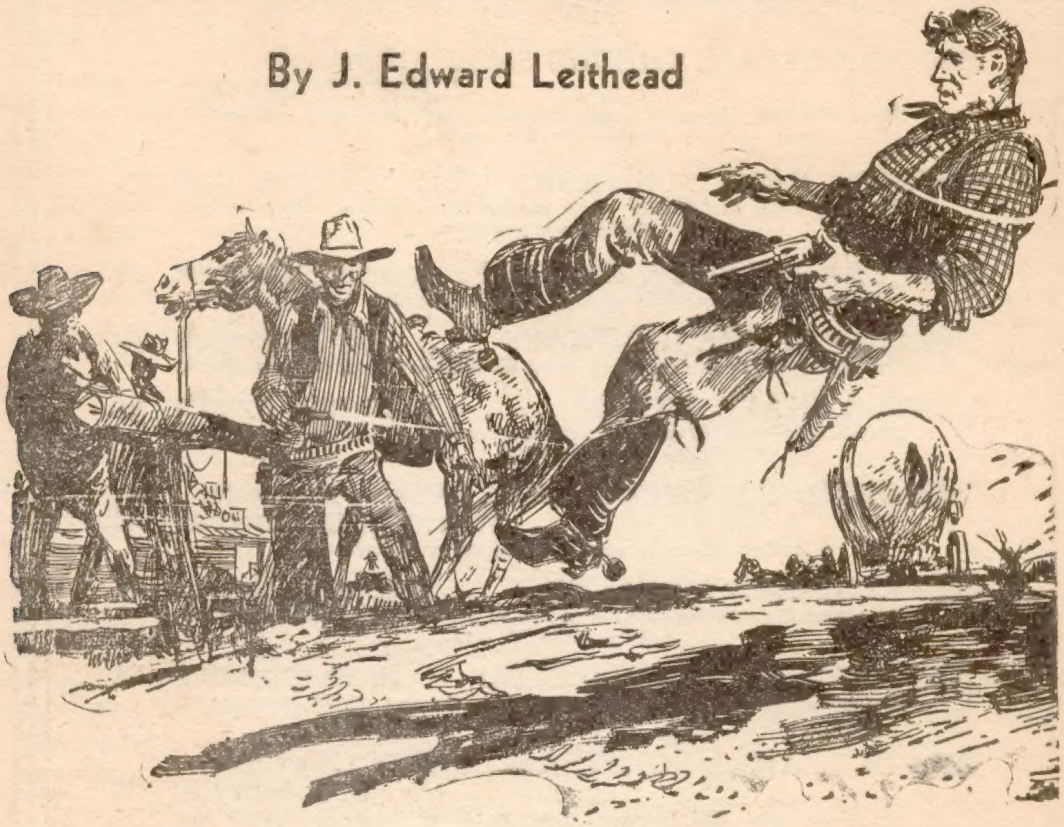
Badman Steals the Big Show

When his pard double-crossed him in their wild horse venture, Vince Wycherly followed him onto the tanbark trail. And even though Vince had been a tophand with mustangs, he had to be a powdersmoke performer after that renegade took over the rodeo.

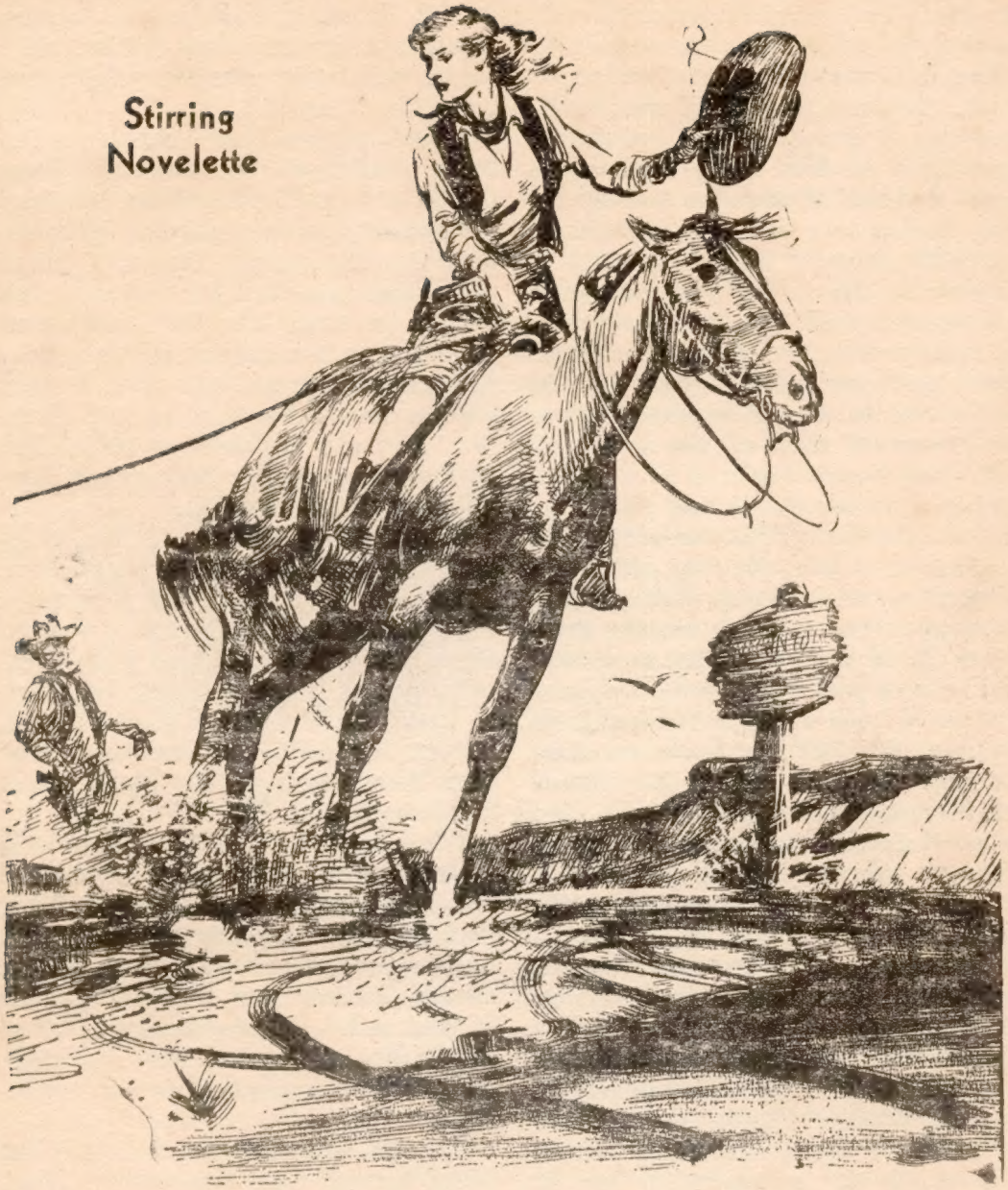
By J. Edward Leithead



CHAPTER I

THE willow-bordered waterhole was deserted when Vince Wycherly raised a cautious head above the granite outcrop, hoping to see the man who had run out on him the day before. But Shel Tustin had high-tailed, taking with him the dozen wild horses they had broken to saddle and every piece of camp equipment. Vince sheathed his Colt, though fires of wrath still burned in his gray eyes. He would have given Shel time to get his gun out, then dusted him both sides, as he deserved.

Vince walked with painful slowness toward the horse he had left out of sight in the jumbled boulders. He had been badly bruised by his headlong spill into that deep fissure in the rimrock beneath the Rising Sun Peaks. It was the most hazardous part of the basin country for chasing the wild horses which roamed there by the hundreds. Vince, with a sure-footed bronc under him, had had his eye on a big buckskin that would have made a handsome saddle horse. But he had lost the buckskin, which leaped the



crevice, while his mount, slipping at a critical instant, shot downward, piling them both at the bottom of the cleft.

The wonder was that the fall hadn't killed them or that the scared bronc hadn't kicked Wycherly to death before he could roll out of reach in the narrow opening. Tough as the mustangs he caught for a living, Vince had broken no bones and his horse had been equally lucky. It wasn't all luck, though, for dead leaves and twigs blown into the crevice from the timbered slopes above had formed a thick mat which cushioned their sudden drop.

When Shel Tustin, who must have been near enough to witness the accident, didn't come immediately to help him out, Wycherly made the mountainside echo with his shouting. But there was no answer, and as night came on, the mustanger realized Shel

had abandoned him, probably thinking he was seriously injured and couldn't get out of the hole unaided.

The tale that Wycherly had once heard, linking Shel with the backshooting of a too trustful cowman, came back to him. The mustanger hadn't believed it when he teamed up with Tustin to run down and break some wild ones for sale. Tustin was a loud-mouth. He had fits of sulkiness and was gun-bad, but he was also a top rider and roper. Now his crooked streak had cropped out. Leaving his saddlemate to die of supposed injuries, he could reap all the profit of their past weeks' work.

Vince and his horse had spent an uncomfortable night at the bottom of the fissure. When the sun came up, the mustanger got busy with his lariat. Jagged notches against the narrow strip of sky where the rock had split in ages past suggested a way out if he could hang his rope on a projecting point. Wycherly had worked himself into a lather before his stone-weighted loop settled on a knob, for he had to cast almost straight upward.

At one side the wall of the crevice rose at a forty-five degree angle. He walked up the rope, his boots prevented from slipping by irregularities in the seamed face of the rock. It was this fissured surface which later enabled him to haul his struggling horse clear of the hole, with the lariat braced around a boulder. The bronc was half strangled in the process and Vince dropped down exhausted after it scrambled over the rim.

QUITTING the mountain range which hemmed in the Rising Sun Basin on the west, Vince had crossed the grassy level of the vast, bowl-like depression with killing in his heart. But he had been too late to catch Tustin at the waterhole. Mounting, he rode eastward with eyes pinned to the tracks of the horse band, which were perhaps twelve or fourteen hours old.

"Shel ain't likely to find a buyer for those mustangs in Wagontongue," reflected Vince, "but he's sure to stop there, if only for some drinks. He'll feel safe in tellin' everybody I cracked up in the rimrock."

Wagontongue had consisted of three shacks, one of them a saloon, before the cattle interests realized that good grazing was going to waste in the basin. Only the wild horse herds had ranged it for years, undisturbed by man. The little town had grown with the coming of the stockmen, but progress was slow. It was still an isolated section of the West, far from any railroad or stage line, without any regular delivery of supplies by wagon freight.

The cowmen, desiring all the grassland for their longhorns, would have been glad to be rid of the mustangs. They encouraged horse hunters to go after the wild ones. Some were fuzztails, not of much account, but most of them would fetch a good price if broken for riding or hauling. Trapping them was a job for experienced mustangers like Vince Wycherly.

When he and Tustin outfitted themselves at Wagontongue, he had looked forward to months of horse catching that should prove highly profitable. But as he followed the horse tracks toward the cowtown, Vince knew that he had made his first and last mustang drive with Shel. The next time he picked a partner he'd be more careful.

The sun was well past the meridian when Wycherly jog-trotted into Wagontongue. He looked in vain for the little jag of wild ones as he passed the town corral. Tustin wouldn't have left them on the street, for they were not gentled sufficiently to stand up to a hitchrack with well-broken saddlers. The distant sound of music fell on Wycherly's ear, and when he noted the absence of people on the sidewalks, it struck him that some kind of a show must have drawn them to the outskirts. Nearing McKittrick's Bar, he saw a horse with fancy trappings tied to the rail. He heard a loud laugh in-

side the saloon. It had issued from the throat of Shel Tustin.

Wycherly hit the ground. He limped to the batwings, pushed on them to peer inside. He observed broad shoulders that looked like Tustin's, filling a silk shirt that was a size too small, very different from the dusty flannel shirt he had worn yesterday. There was a brand-new Stetson on his head, and white angora chaps had replaced the plain leather gear that had previously encased his legs. In fact, until Shel laughed again, Vince was slightly in doubt it was the man he sought. At the sound of Wycherly's voice, the big fellow wheeled at the bar, his right hand blurring down.

"Waltz out and settle up, Shel!" barked Vince. "I didn't die in the mountains like you hoped I would. And where's those mustangs?"

Tustin's fingers unclasped from his Colt butt when he saw Wycherly drawing bead. He was a little pale through his desert tan. "The mustangs belonged to both of us, Vince. I sure thought you had broke your neck and your bronc's, that there was nothing I could do."

"You heard me hollerin', but you just rode off!" accused Vince, his big-boned, ruddy face twisted with fury. "There's no argument about what you were up to. You aimed to do me dirt. I got no reason to give you an even break, but I will. C'mon!"

Wycherly let the half doors swing into place and stepped backward a dozen paces, leathering his Colt. The scrape of boots on sanded floor indicated that Tustin was dragging reluctant feet doorward. Up the street came a horse at a gallop, but Wycherly didn't turn his eyes. In another moment Tustin would erupt, shooting, from the saloon. There was a swishing, whistling sound as the rider neared. A whiplash, swept through air, might have made it, but Vince knew better. He saw Tustin's new sombrero above the batwings, then the door flapped outward.

WYCHERLY reached for his gun, at the same time springing sideways. Someone had thrown a rope at him. He hoped to escape the loop and beat Shel to the draw, but the noose whipped down about his arms, clamping his gun-hand immovably on the holster. He was jerked from his feet as the rope tautened, while the slug Tustin had triggered whined through space.

"Tustin!" a voice shrilled, and Wycherly rolled at the end of the hard-drawn rope, flashing a look at Shel, who was lowering his six-shooter, then switching gaze to the roper.

What he saw was a dark-haired girl whose black Stetson, with range binding, beaded vest, gauntlets, and fringed leather shirt stamped her a rider of the tanbark. Her bronc was a gaily caparisoned animal like the one tied to the saloon rack. For a moment Wycherly returned her anxious stare, his expression softening a little as her comeliness worked its charm. He loosened the rope, flung it aside and got to his feet.

"Prettyface," he said, "that was nice ropin', but I don't believe I know you."

She smiled, and her teeth were white and even. "That's the name of a flower, isn't it?"

The mustanger nodded. "Grows in California. It's beautiful."

"I'm not from California," she said. "I was born and raised here in Rising Sun Basin. But I've been with Bronco Buckner's Rodeo Shows for two years, billed as *The Lariat Queen*. Of course," she added, "there's plenty of cowgirls who throw a rope as well as I do. My name's Elaine Hubbard."

"Which explains everything but why you dabbed that rope on me just as I was goin' to mix smoke with a sidewinder I used to ride with." Vince glanced at Tustin. "I'm kinda takin' a chance not to watch him. Looks like he had tied onto this rodeo show himself."

Shel, holstering his gun, stalked

forward. "Wycherly, you forced the fight. You've got it wrong about yesterday. If you'd let me talk—"

"All right, talk!" snapped Wycherly.

"True as I stand in boot leather," declared Tustin, "I thought you'd been killed when your bronc dived into that hole in the rocks. I didn't want to look at what was left of you, so last night I hit out for Wagon-tongue with our mustangs. Found Buckner's show here, sold the boss the horses, and he offered me a job with the outfit. That's how come you see me togged out in rodeo clothes. That's my show horse yonder. And say—" he dug a hand in his pocket—"here's your half of the mustang money."

Vince took the greenbacks. He knew Shel was lying about not deserting him, but his anger had cooled in the presence of Elaine Hubbard. He looked up to see her smiling at him while she retied her rope on the saddle.

"I hope you fellows are going to make up," said Elaine. "It's against the rules for show riders to leave the grounds during a performance. The boss missed Tustin and sent me after him. When I saw you in a fighting pose, Wycherly, and the show horses at the rack, I suspected Shel was in trouble. I got my rope ready, and just then his sombrero showed above the door. I had to save Tustin for his act, which goes on in a few minutes."

"Just savin' him for the show?" said Vince with a twisted grin.

Elaine Hubbard nodded, but her half-veiled glance betrayed a more personal interest in Shel Tustin. "I'm sorry I threw you so hard, Wycherly."

"Seein' who did it," said Vince, "I don't mind. I'll even give Shel the benefit of the doubt and let him go."

"Get on your horse, Shel," said the girl, "and hurry back to the lot."

Tustin strode toward the hitchrack. "I was only gettin' a drink while waitin' my turn, Elaine."

"I'll go along," Wycherly announced. "I'd like to see that show."

From a grandstand seat he witnessed feats of horsemanship and marksmanship, steer-riding and bulldogging. Some of them he could have performed himself. What pleased him most was Elaine's trick roping. She had been too modest about her accomplishment. In her hands a lariat became a thing of life, whether she was in the saddle or on the ground. And Tustin made a spectacular ride on a bucker. He swung his hat and bowed when he was applauded. He strutted. And Vince watched him with curling lip.

It wasn't in Wycherly's mind to join the show until, as the crowd slowly filed from the main tent, with the cowboy band blaring the exit march, Elaine beckoned him to the back yard. There she introduced him him to a lean, leather-faced man in a big hat —Bronco Buckner himself.

"Miss Hubbard tells me you're a mustanger," said the showman. "Which means you're a top rider, and I'm hirin' that kind. How about it?"

CHAPTER II

THE salary Buckner offered was too tempting to turn down. He gave up the idea of horse hunting with another partner. Traveling with a show would be less arduous, he'd see a lot of the country—and be near Elaine Hubbard. Although Shel Tustin seemed to have made quite an impression on short acquaintance, Elaine had thought enough of Vince to mention him to the show owner.

Tustin plainly wasn't pleased to learn that Wycherly was on the show payroll. Perhaps he feared Vince would talk to Elaine and Buckner behind his back. If so, his fears were groundless. Though convinced that Tustin was a bad egg, Wycherly intended letting the show people find it out for themselves. But he would keep an eye on Shel.

Vince took part in the night performance, the last to be given in Rising Sun Basin. It was just the start

of the show season. Buckner had opened there, coming from his winter quarters in Texas, because it was Elaine's home town and he was always sure of a good attendance. After the show, Wycherly, in company with Elaine, Tustin, and Buckner, visited the girl's parents in Wagontongue. Gabe Hubbard had been a tophand at one time and taught his daughter how to ride and rope. Because of ill health he had been obliged to quit the saddle. Now he ran a hardware store in town, above which the Hubbards lived.

Elaine's parents were pardonably proud of her stellar role in the show. But the old man remarked that such a big outfit, while he wished it could stay longer, put a strain on the cowtown's resources.

"We merchants like your money, Buckner," he said, grinning at the showman, "and as far as my business is concerned, sellin' you guns and what-not in the hardware line, there's certainly no kick. But the provision and feed dealers would be hard put to keep you supplied for very long. Deliveries in this section are mighty uncertain."

"I know," said Buckner. "What this town needs is a wagon freight line runnin' regularly from some supply point. Transportation, too, a weekly or even a daily stage. Somebody could make his pile doin' it."

"Somebody will, one of these days," Hubbard said. "This is new country, only began to open up since the cattlemen came in."

Buckner's show traveled on wheels. In the morning, since the tents had been taken down and loaded the night before, the red-and-gold wagons were on the move northward. Wycherly's place was with the horses, and there were plenty of them. But it was a lot easier than driving wild mustangs, and he took to the gypsy life from the first day.

In a month, Vince had perfected himself in some trick riding that would have permitted him to ride with the star performers. But his fondness for horses was so deeply rooted that he was usually to be found with the wranglers on journeys between the one- and two-day stands. For this he was sneered at by Shel Tustin, but professional jealousy was partly the reason for Shel's show of contempt. Vince was as good, if not better, at bronc riding. He drew quite as much applause. And he got along with the other show riders and the canvasmen, while Shel was heartily disliked because of his swaggering.

Bronco Buckner gave Tustin top billing in spite of his frequent drinking bouts, for Shel was a flashy performer. Every town they hit, Shel drank and gambled away his wages, but, so far as Vince could see, none of this lessened Elaine's regard for the big show-off. Then came a day when Wycherly figured his chances to cut out Shel with Elaine were killed forever.

They were playing a cowtown which had been plastered with show bills by the advance agent. At the afternoon performance, the crowd was ribbed up to see someone break a leg or spill some gore. The crowd nearly got its wish. Elaine Hubbard was the center of attraction in the canvas-walled arena.

A Chihuahua steer had been turned out of the chute and the girl took after it, spinning her loop. The rope snaked out, but as the noose fell over the wide horns, before she could take a half hitch and brace her mount to upset the mean-looking steer, it came around swiftly and charged. The horse went up in the air, trying to leap over the Chihuahua as it lunged in. Elaine was pitched out of the saddle.

AS SHE struck the tanbark, Vince and Shel, who always acted as hazers when Elaine was roping steers, raced from opposite ends of the arena. The girl, partly stunned by the fall, was feebly attempting to rise. Her horse, escaping with a slight wound from a ripping horn, had run away, and the steer swung about, bellow-

ing, to give its attention to the moving form on the ground. Both Vince and Shel were riding their spurs, but Shel had been closer in when they started. He kicked his bronc between the thundering, thousand-pound steer and the girl, and leaned down from the saddle.

Vince, coming like a streak with his rope aswing, saw Elaine snatched upward in a flurry of dust. Shel's horse pounded off at a tangent as the Chihuahua swept by, to be caught next instant in Vince's loop and thrown hard. Not until the steer was up again and on its lumbering way to the chute, did Wycherly turn his horse toward Shel and Elaine.

Tustin was making the most of his spectacular rescue. He had stepped from the saddle with Elaine, and now stood with an arm about her, acknowledging the cheers of the crowd with the hat in his other hand. Bronco Buckner, still white around the gills, was heading for the pair with long strides. But Vince, being mounted, reached them first and slid to the ground.

"How you feelin', Elaine?" he asked.

"She's a little shaky, of course!" Shel glared at him. "I can take care of her without your help." Evidently he didn't like Vince sharing the spotlight.

Wycherly reddened. He hadn't clashed with Tustin since they had joined the show, chiefly on Elaine's account. But he would have swung on him then if they had been somewhere else.

"Please, Shel, not so rough," said Elaine. "He took care of the steer." She smiled at Vince. "I'll be all right in a minute."

Bronco Buckner came up, exploding, "That was a near thing, honey! Are you hurt? Want to cut your act short?"

But Elaine shook her head. "Catch my horse and I'll ride it out. Can't disappoint the customers unless you're half dead." She wriggled out of Tustin's arms and faced the stands with a dazzling smile, waving her hand. There was a fresh outburst of cheering.

"Ain't she a wonder?" grinned the old showman. "And that rescue business will be swell publicity, Shel."

Vince climbed back in the saddle to fetch Elaine's runaway horse. He was mighty relieved the girl hadn't suffered any injury, but he couldn't help wishing it had been his hand that had swept her from the Chihuahua's path. And his score against Shel was mounting.

It was in a Midwest town, Flat Prairie, that Tustin came a cropper. The show season was more than half over. Buckner had made money and lost some, too, because of rainy spells. The town was situated in the heart of a prosperous farming region, and the rodeo show was booked for a two-day stand. At the end of the first night performance, Wycherly rode with the others to the horse tent and unsaddled. As he strolled toward the dressing tents, he noticed Shel and Elaine ahead of him. The girl was clinging to Shel's arm, talking earnestly.

Shel answered roughly, "I'll do what I please!"

TUSTIN left her at the door of his dressing tent, but Elaine didn't go away; she just stood there with her head down. Vince halted in a pool of shadow a few yards from the canvas shelter. Finally Tustin reappeared. He had shed his rodeo garb, all but the hat and boots. Probably his gun, with real cartridges in the chambers instead of blanks, was stuck in his trousers band, concealed by his sack coat. He was seldom without the weapon when not working in the arena. In towns like the present one there was an ordinance against the wearing of guns—openly, anyhow.

Vince heard Shel say irritably, "You still here, Elaine? Why don't you go hit the hay?"

"Because," she replied in a firm voice, "I want you to quit these jamborees. You come back drunk and

broke every time. When are you going to straighten up and start saving, so we can be married?"

Wycherly's heart turned to lead as he listened. So she was going to marry the no-good sidewinder? Well, he might have expected it. He waited for Shel's reply.

"I'll start sometime, Elaine, don't you worry. But I like a little excitement." Shel tried to kiss her, but she backed away. "All right, get sore! I'll see you later."

Tustin strode off to saddle a bronc and seek the red light district of the town, as usual. Elaine walked slowly toward the spot where Vince stood. She didn't know he was there until he spoke.

"I was listenin', Elaine. Couldn't help it."

The girl came closer. "It's no matter, Vince." She paused, and there were tears in her voice when she went on. "He can't love me very much, Vince, acting the way he does."

Vince said grimly, "Shel loves nobody but himself. It might've been better had you let us shoot it out in front of McKittrick's Bar that day. You don't know how it hurts me to see him breakin' your heart."

Elaine reached up and patted Vince's cheek. "Maybe I do. Well, I'm tired. Guess I'll turn in. Good night, Vince."

Wycherly didn't go to bed at once. In fact, he was still roaming about the show lot, thinking what he'd like to do to Shel, when he heard the clop of hoofs. The night watchman spoke to the rider, who answered. It was Tustin, and Wycherly stepped out to intercept the horseman as he came on toward the tents.

"Want to talk to you, Shel!"

"Huh? Oh, Wycherly!" Tustin, peering at the figure in the gloom, didn't sound drunk. "Nothin' I know of for us to talk about. And it's late. I want to get some sleep."

He seemed agitated, something unusual for Shel, and kept his horse moving. Vince didn't follow him, not wishing to rouse the other show people with an altercation. Talk would never straighten out Shel Tustin, anyway; only a bullet could do that.

Vince recalled Shel's excited state the next morning. As he left the cook tent, Wycherly heard the boss bawl his name. He didn't notice that Tustin had followed him out, pausing to light a quirly. There were three horsemen, all strangers, in front of Buckner's private tent, and Vince hurried over.

"Wycherly," said Buckner, jerking a hand at a farmerish-looking man with a badge, "this is Constable Hankins. He's got an unusual request. Wants a couple of good trackers to help him find a murderer. Back on his home range," the showman addressed the peace officer, "Wycherly was a mustanger. I reckon he'll fill the bill."

"Yeh," nodded Hankins. "Seein' we've got no bloodhounds, I figured a Western outfit like yours would have some men who could nose out a trail."

"Who's been murdered?" Vince asked. He heard a step and glanced around to see Tustin walking toward the group. Shel looked curious but unperturbed. Probably he had had a slug or two of whisky.

"Here's another mustanger," boomed Buckner. "Shel, there's a little trailin' for you and Wycherly to do this mornin'. Hope you get back in time for the afternoon show."

"Anything to oblige," said Tustin. "What's happened?"

CHAPTER III

CONSTABLE HANKINS said that a prominent citizen of Flat Prairie, Alvin Proctor, had been shot down outside of Keno Kent's gambling house the night before. He winked as he made the statement.

"Shock to Proctor's family and friends in more ways than one—findin' out that such a highly regarded man went to a joint like that. Anyway, Proctor is dead as a stone. He was robbed of a diamond scarf pin, a diamond ring and whatever money he

had on him. Nobody knows of any enemy of Proctor's who'd want to kill him, and it's my notion he was shot in mistake for Keno Kent. Proctor and the gambler resembled each other a little. About the same height, both square-faced, with handlebar mustaches. Dressed somethin' alike, too."

Vince stole a glance at Shel, who was listening with eyes half-lidded. He asked the constable, "Any idea who the killer might be?"

"Well," said Hankins, "there's plenty of farmhands lose money in Keno's place. Maybe one of 'em was so hot over his losses that he laid for Kent outside. If I'm right, then Proctor, leavin' the joint at an unlucky moment, took the lead intended for the gambler. I've questioned Keno, but he's got a poor memory for folks who drop money at his games. If you fellers'll saddle up, we'll get goin'. Bring your shootin'-irons, because the killer is like to fight if we run him down. Some of them farm boys are tough customers."

"I've got my smoker," said Shel with a grin, flipping open his coat.

Vince didn't say anything as they headed for the horse tent, but he was doing a lot of thinking. They passed Elaine on the way, and she asked what was up. Their answer left her looking gravely thoughtful.

With Constable Hankins and his assistants, Vince and Shel rode away from the show grounds. They struck the main thoroughfare, turned into a cross street three blocks east, at the far end of which was the red light district. The name KENT'S appeared over the door of a rather ornate establishment, but the gamblers kept out of sight when the horsemen stopped in the street. Hankins pointed to where Proctor's body had lain in the gutter and walked back to a wide alleyway.

"Right here's where the killer's horse stood," he said. "We know that because horses don't usually come into the alley, and there was an empty .45 shell beside the hoofmarks. We can't tell if he went up or down the street afterward, account of there's considerable ridin' to and from here at night."

The two horse hunters prowled about, Vince searching for the print of peg-heeled boots, though he was careful not to mention it to Shel. But there were no marks of the killer's feet in the soft earth. To trail-wise eyes like the mustangers', it wasn't so difficult to trace the hoofprints after they quit the alley, for apparently few horses had passed that way since the killing.

"Went south," announced Vince, and Shel nodded in agreement.

They all swung back in the saddle. Southward, the street merged with a dirt wagon road, and beyond lay farming country. Traffic had been fairly heavy, judging from the wheel ruts, as the farmers drove in with produce early that morning. Vince hovered over the sunken tracks, sharply scanning every print of a horse's iron-shod feet. The killer's horse had small hoofs, suggestive of the riding stock in the show, while most other tracks were those of heavy-footed farm animals. Suddenly Tustin broke for his saddle, exclaiming:

"Fellow left the road and struck for the open country!"

"It's a farmhand," exulted the constable, "just as I figured!"

As the four remounted and headed for a field edging the road, Shel faced back to shout, "Ain't you comin', Vince?"

Wycherly, stooping beside a clutter of tracks, shook his head. "Looks like the trail of the killer's mount right here. He rode east—"

"You're off the scent, boy!" cried Tustin. "We'll bring in the murderer and show you up as a bum tracker!"

WHEN they were far across the field, Vince hit leather and trotted back to the gambling house. He unbuttoned his coat before he palmed the doorknob, so that the six-

shooter in his waistband was in easy reach. Several sharp-eyed men, playing cards at a table, regarded him coldly. But behind the bleak stares, Vince sensed their uneasiness. One, with a handlebar mustache, said:

"The game ain't running. Too early."

"Are you Keno Kent?" Wycherly asked. At the gambler's nod, he went on. "Guess you were peepin' from the window when I was outside with the constable's party. Notice that other show rider in Stetson and boots? Was he here last night?"

Keno Kent slowly nodded.

"Did he leave the place broke? I know you don't like to admit cleanin' a man. If it happens too often, it looks like you're runnin' crooked games. But you better talk, Keno!"

Sweat beaded the gambler's forehead as he gazed at the rock-steady gun. "Yeh, your friend said he was cleaned. Made a big holler, but the game was straight. If you think you're goin' to collect—why, by thunder—" anger overcame Kent's fear of the mustanger's gun—"I think he was the skunk who shot Alvin Proctor, meanin' to get me!"

"So do I, Keno." Vince moved back to the door, lowering his Colt. "He won't try it again, though I reckon your checkin' out wouldn't be any loss to Flat Prairie."

Wycherly eased through the doorway and mounted. *Shel,* he thought, *I've got you! But I'll just make sure those hoof tracks end at the show grounds!* Back on the wagon road, he found that the small-hoofed horse had re-entered town by another cross street. It was nearing noon when he rode in among the tents. Most of the show people were eating, for the afternoon performance was not far off.

Vince swung down at Shel's dressing tent and went in. He looked at the paraphernalia strewn about, his eye lighting on a small trunk which Tustin had bought at a town along the show route. The trunk was locked, but Wycherly broke it open with his six-gun. He lifted the lid and rummaged. Bronco Buckner's voice rumbled at the tent door:

"How come you're back alone, Vince?"

Wycherly faced about, clasping something in his right hand. He saw Elaine Hubbard at the old showman's side. For a moment, gazing at the girl, he kept his fingers locked over the articles taken from Shel's trunk.

"What's that in your hand?" she asked.

Silently he extended his hand, palm upward, revealing a ring and a scarf-pin, set with diamonds. Elaine and Buckner gasped.

"You saw where I got 'em," said Vince. "Pretty valuable, I reckon. Shel could've sold 'em in another town. I trailed his horse from the alley by that gamblin' house clear back to the show lot. This jewelry pins Proctor's murder on him so he can't wriggle out. He'd lost heavy at Keno Kent's. Probably didn't know he'd killed and robbed the wrong man till the constable arrived this mornin'."

He stopped, a distressed look on his face, for Elaine's head had dropped on Buckner's shoulder. She wept, words coming with the tearing sobs, "I knew he'd get into trouble going the pace! He wouldn't listen!"

"That son-of-a-gun!" growled Buckner. "Where's he at, Vince?"

"Leadin' the constable on a false trail. He won't have to show Hankins any tracks to make him think they're headed right. Hope they don't lay hold of some poor innocent devil of a farmhand. I reckon Shel's a little worried about me pickin' up his tracks."

"And now they'll hang him!" cried Elaine in a fresh outburst.

Vince cast a despairing eye at Bronco Buckner. "I didn't think she'd take on so."

"She'll get over it." The old showman caressed the dark head. "Yessir, she'll come to realize she was mighty lucky in not marryin' the hellion. You done a good job, Vince. We'll start

the show without Tustin, but be on the lookout for him."

ELAINE was a good trooper. Nobody in the crowded main tent, that afternoon, would have guessed that the smiling Lariat Queen was brokenhearted, waiting for the last act in a tragedy, the arrest of the man she loved. Tustin hadn't returned to the lot by suppertime. Vince and the boss ate hurriedly. As they left the cook tent, Wycherly said to Elaine:

"He ought to be here soon. Better not stick around if you see him ridin' up."

Elaine laid a hand on his arm. "I won't. I don't think I could bear it, though I know he's got it coming. Thanks for thinking of me, Vince."

It was getting dark when Wycherly and the show owner stepped outside. A patter of hoofs drew their eyes toward some horsemen just entering the grounds near the main tent.

Buckner said, "That's them and they've got a prisoner." He glanced over his shoulder to be sure Elaine wasn't near the entrance of the cook tent. "C'mon, Vince, we'll go meet 'em."

As the two men stalked through the deepening gloom, the riders pulled up. Between Tustin and the constable was a hatless, wild-eyed young fellow wearing handcuffs. Shel cried:

"We got the killer! Trailed him to a farm down yonder. He broke away once, gave us a hard chase. We stopped by to show him to you, Vince, bein's you were so sure the trail led east."

"This here plowboy admits bein' at Kent's last night and losin' a month's wages," said Constable Hankins. "He's mule-jawed about confessin' the murder, but we'll get it out of him, don'tcha fret."

"Good reason he won't admit it," Vince bit out. "Tustin did that killin' himself. Took off his boots in the alley, knowin' the peg heels would be a dead giveaway in this part of the country. Hid the diamond ring and scarfpin in his dressin' tent."

"Take the murderin' lobo, Hankins!" roared Buckner.

Wycherly, knowing Tustin better than the rest, doubted Hankin's ability to arrest the killer. He jerked the gun from his waistband. But Shel had realized he was in a spot the minute Vince opened his mouth. Swiftly backing his horse around the prisoner's mount, Shel ripped buttons off his coat getting his pistol out. A shot blazed at Wycherly over the farmhand's shoulder. The mustanger felt the bullet's hot breath on his cheek, but he couldn't fire back without hitting the manacled man.

Constable Hankins yanked his gun and hipped in the saddle. But Shel caught the movement, unraveled flame. The peace officer yelled and dropped his weapon. His assistants scattered as Tustin opened up on them. The farmhand's plowhorse took fright at the gun thunder, lunged forward, nearly bowling over Wycherly and Buckner. Vince, springing clear, slipped on a tuft of grass. He came up on his knees, fogged his gun at the rider galloping toward the big tent. Shel, lying along his horse's neck, was a poor target. He gave no sign that Vince's bullets touched him.

Buckner had no gun, but stood yelling for Vince to chop Shel down. The constable's men had joined in shooting. Tustin's bronc vanished around the wall of the tent with the rider still in the saddle. Hankins wasn't seriously wounded. He released the farmhand and clattered away with his assistants, while Wycherly ran for the horse tent. Fifteen minutes later Vince found the lawmen riding aimlessly up and down the main street. Tustin, with a head start, had eluded them.

"That horse of his must be wore out," said Wycherly. "He may try to board the first train out of town. He has the money he took from Proctor."

"Bet you that's his aim!" exclaimed the constable. "We'll go over to the

station and watch. There's an express for the west at 11:30."

"The show will be over by that time," said Vince. "I'll join you there."

He rode back to the show lot, reported to Bronco Buckner and changed into his rodeo garb. Elaine didn't say anything when Vince met her for the grand entry, though he knew she was aware that Shel had escaped arrest. He couldn't tell from her expression whether she was relieved or not. The last of the crowd was leaving when a canvasman came bellowing across the lot:

"The horse tent's on fire!"

Wycherly, starting for the railroad station on the horse he had ridden in the arena, wrenched the animal about. He saw flames shooting from the top and sides of the tent sheltering all the riding and draft stock of the show except the animal he bestrode.

CHAPTER IV

FIGHTING that fire was the worst experience Wycherly had ever passed through. It was the plight of the horses that made it terrible for him. He didn't mind the burns he got, rescuing the few animals that could be reached without being destroyed by the flames himself. The tent was a raging inferno by the time the show riders and the canvasmen had gathered in response to the alarm. From the boss down, they worked with little regard for personal safety, although there wasn't much they could do. The flames had spread quickly through the straw strewn about for bedding and ignited the canvas walls.

Flat Prairie's volunteer fire department arrived to play two streams of water on the conflagration, keeping it from spreading to other tents. But when the fire fighters wound up their hose lines, there was a heap of smoking ruins and charred horseflesh. Elaine Hubbard, as singed and smudgy from her efforts as any man present, dragged weary feet toward Wycherly and Buckner. The showman was balanced on a tent stake, his hat off, his head bowed on his chest.

"I guess," said Elaine, her voice raspy with smoke, "there isn't any doubt who's responsible for this horrible mess."

"None," replied Vince. "Tustin probably spotted the constable watchin' at the station and figured he couldn't get away on the train. So he sneaked back for a fresh mount, knowin' he'd really have a better chance horseback than on the cars, which could be searched at any station if the boss telegraphed. And for revenge on the outfit, he fired the hay."

Elaine's eyes filled at the memory of the hapless horses, then her anger blazed forth. "Shel Tustin's lower than a snake! How could I have thought I loved him! I only hope he gets caught!"

Bronco Buckner lifted his head. "Now you're talkin' sense, honey. But I'm afraid he'll get clean away. Can't run the show without horses. I'll have to close. Hardly enough animals left to take the wagons back to winter quarters."

"Buckner," said Wycherly, "I've been thinkin' where we might corral another bunch of horses. And they wouldn't cost anything except for the catchin'."

"You mean the wild ones in Rising Sun Basin, Vince?" Elaine broke in.

"Yep. Won't have 'em ready till next year, but anyhow it's near the end of the show season."

Buckner got up, sudden enthusiasm in his manner. "That idea's a life saver, Vince. You gather all the wild horses you can, enough to break in for next year's show and as many more to start a ranch, so we can raise our own stock and be sure of a future supply. The boys in the show, bein' real hands, will help you. And Elaine, too, I reckon."

"Try to leave me out of it!" cried Elaine. "We ought to make a good

roundup before snow flies on the old home range."

When Vince and Elaine surprised old Gabe Hubbard by walking into the Wagontongue hardware store a few weeks later, the girl's father had a surprise of his own to spring on them. He listened, frowning, to the recital of events that had led to the closing of the rodeo show.

"I'll say that Tustin has a cast-iron nerve!" exclaimed the storekeeper. "He's here in the basin. Yes—" Hubbard nodded as his daughter and the mustanger stared—"he showed up ten days ago, tellin' me he'd quit Buckner after an argument. On the way home, he said, he met a man named Asa Lipscomb, who planned to run stage and freight lines to Risin' Sun Basin from the nearest railroad.

"Needin' a lot of horses, and wantin' 'em as cheap as possible, Lipscomb hired Tustin and a lot of others to make a big gather of the wild ones. I know Tustin wasn't lyin' that time because Lipscomb was in Wagontongue a month ago, tellin' us his plans. I sold Tustin some wire myself for horse traps. He's out workin' the basin now."

VINCE and Elaine looked at each other. The mustanger said, "We haven't time to bother with Tustin if we're to round up a big bunch for Buckner before winter. And there's plenty of horses for both huntin' parties, if he'll let us alone. But—" Vince paused, his gray eyes cloudy, and Elaine said quickly:

"But you think he'll make trouble."

"I do. We know too much about him. We'll be in his way. Probably he figured on trappin' enough horses for Lipscomb and clearin' out before we came back. Mr. Hubbard, if you have any wire left, we'll take it. I need a wagon and grub for the men I've brought along from Buckner's show."

"Got plenty of wire," said Hubbard and glanced at his daughter. "I suppose you're ridin' in this horse hunt, Elaine?" At her nod, he grunted. "All right, but I don't like it, with Tustin and his hard-lookin' outfit around. Knowin' you're through with him, he may try to do you a meanness."

"I'll look after her, Mr. Hubbard," Vince assured him.

The storekeeper nodded. But when Wycherly's outfit left Wagontongue the next morning, Gabe Hubbard hired a holster at the livery stable to ride to the distant country seat. The messenger was to inform Sheriff Duncan that a wanted killer and arsonist was riding the basin range, and to urge the lawman to come and take the culprit. Since Tustin had not yet committed any crime in Duncan's bailiwick, Hubbard feared the sheriff might be a little slow to act.

Vince, with Elaine riding at his side, struck out for the nearest waterhole. They had put away their rodeo clothes, and now wore servicable range garb. The mustanger wasn't surprised when he saw that a big wire trap, with wing fences on either side, had been erected at the water hole he had hoped to use. A lot of mustangs were milling crazily in the trap, evidently just driven in by Tustin and his men. Back of that enclosure was another, partly filled with horses that showed only a mild interest in the fury of their wild brothers. These animals, caught in previous drives, were becoming accustomed to their captivity.

The horsemen around the main trap turned in saddles as one pointed out the dust-raising cavalcade coming up the range. Wycherly's eyes narrowed as this rider pushed on the reins, halting a little way from the trap. Behind him, all the other mustangers faced their mounts outward in a watchful group. Vince glanced at Elaine's set face. She didn't turn aside as he rode straight toward Shel Tustin, whose eyes gleamed from a ragged growth of whiskers. Not the natty Tustin of the rodeo arena, but an unkempt, dangerous outlaw.

"Howdy, Vince?"

"Howdy, Shel? This your main camp?"

"Yeh. Got a few little ones strung around the basin. I'm catchin' for a fellow named Lipscomb. He's—"

"I heard all about your contract with him, Shel. We're doin' the same for Buckner, since you just about cleaned him out of his horses with the fire."

"What fire?" said Shel. Then he caught Elaine's look of indignation and loathing. "Sure, sure I done it!" he snapped defiantly. "Think I'd let myself be hung? Buckner and all of you turned against me. I was cut off at the railroad station. Had to get away somehow. No time even to say good-by, Elaine," he added mockingly.

Then she tongue-lashed him and he took it, though he reddened to his ears. Wycherly noticed Shel's wolf-faced crew winking and grinning at one another. They were riffraff of the border. When Elaine stopped, Shel's venomous gaze swung from her to Vince.

"All I've got to say is, keep out of our way or else!"

"Big talk for an outlaw," returned Vince bleakly, "but you always were a big-mouth, Shel. That suits me right now. We'll be busy roundin' up horses for Buckner. Afterward, if you're still around, I may get in your hair!"

HIS horse and Elaine's moved off together, the other Buckner riders trotted after them, with the wagon bringing up the rear. It was midafternoon before they found a waterhole that hadn't already been wired by Tustin's mustangers. A wild band was drinking as the party approached but, at the warning whistle of the stallion leader, the animals fled. With manes and tails whipping in the breeze, their unshod hoofs hammered the top soil into a powdery haze, not so thick as to conceal the sleek hides of silver gray, chestnut, piebald, dun, blue, roan, black, and white. Their thundering retreat was a blood-stirring spectacle.

"It almost seems a shame to catch and put them to work!" Elaine cried, pity mingling with the excited sparkle in her eyes.

Vince smiled. "If we don't do it, Tustin's gang will, or they'll be Winchestered eventually by grass-hungry cowmen. We'll have that trap ready by tomorrow if we get right at it."

Postholes were dug around the pool. By suppertime some of the posts had been sunk, and the work was continued after dark by torchlight. The hour was late when the outfit went to bed, with half the wire strung. During the night the wild horses returned warily, bolting when they caught the scent of human enemies. In the morning the wiring was finished, and Vince, surveying the high trap, with a big gate at the front, declared himself satisfied.

The wild ones were sure to come again, and the mustangers lay down in the brush to windward of the trap, leaving a few of the saddle horses grazing outside the corral. These animals were decoys to draw the mustangs on toward that open gate. They might not venture near until after dark, although Vince, observing a bunch or two out on the plain, gazing longingly at the waterhole, believed that thirst would bring them sooner.

He was right. The small bunches grew into a big herd, and several stallions circled out ahead of the rest. The wind carried no warning; the leaders saw the saddlers grazing peacefully. They whinnied and the herd moved forward.

Vince looked at Elaine, who was in a trembling state of uncertainty, expecting the big band to take fright at any instant. He spoke guardedly to the men. "It won't be long now." The hoofs shuffled nearer. Now the saddlers were lost sight of in the mass of wild horses. The latter hesitated at the unfamiliar trap opening. Then

some of the less wary animals shouldered through, and the others followed. Too late the horses heard the near-by brush crackle as it yielded up the darting figures of men, charging on the corral.

Bedlam broke loose with the banging of the gate. And for a long time the mustangers could see nothing but the streaking bodies, smashing against the fence, rising in wild leaps to fall back, while the air was filled with frantic neighing and thumping of hoofs. Gradually the uproar subsided, and Vince, looking the stock over said they'd made a good catch.

That night they heard from Tustin. Shots blazed suddenly in the dark. Wycherly, spreading his blanket, felt a bullet rip through its folds. It was lucky they hadn't a fire going. Tustin had waited to attack until they had caught a trap full of mustangs, which he could add to the herd he had already rounded up. Whipping out his Colt, Vince shouted:

"Surround the trap, boys! Don't let 'em break through anywhere!"

He fired as he spoke, for the flashes continued on the outskirts of camp. The rush of booted feet, angry exclamations, showed that his orders were being obeyed. He called Elaine's name sharply as he moved back toward the trap gate in a crouch.

"Here I am, Vince!" her voice answered at his elbow, then her gun gushed fire. The bullet must have hit, for someone cursed.

Wycherly told the girl to flatten, dropping beside her. Tustin's gang was creeping in, as shown by spurts of flame from various points. And from every side of the horse trap muzzle-fire spat back. Yells and scrambling sounds indicated that most of the lead wasn't wasted. The wild horses had gone hog-wild from the first volley. It sounded as if they'd kick the trap apart. Vince's blood chilled at the screams of animals felled by stray bullets that whistled between the wire strands. He cursed Tustin and banged away at moving shadows. Two arose and fell again, to creep no more.

WHEN he had emptied his gun, he heard boots stumbling away, then the stirring of horses' hoofs, out at the edge of camp. He said to Elaine, "They've had enough! Tustin can't afford to lose too many men, and if stray lead downed too many mustangs, he'd defeat his main object."

"Thing he'll come back?" said Elaine. "Another night, I mean."

Vince didn't answer that, not until he had counted the men Shel had left behind. Then he voiced the opinion that Tustin had been taught a sharp lesson and would attempt no more horse lifting. When a week had passed without their adding any mustangs to the herd in the trap, because the Tustin outfit had apparently caught all the others in that part of the basin,Wycherly led his party to the rimrock under the Rising Sun Peaks. He left a couple of men at the main camp, feeling that two were enough to guard the horses.

They were gone ten days, having many a bad spill as they drove the mustangs out of rocky coverts. Vince would have preferred leaving Elaine at the waterhole. Afterward, he was glad he didn't. The nights were freezing in the mountains. Snow could be expected at any time now. They bunched the animals for driving on the ninth day, being obliged to tie up a foreleg of certain outlaws that would otherwise have broken away.

By noon of the tenth day, the horse hunters were in sight of the main camp. Wycherly's heart sank when he saw the trap empty. A little later the two guards were found stiff in death, with little heaps of brass shells beside them.

With smoldering eyes, Vince faced Elaine and the grim-looking men of the party. "Well, I guessed wrong. Tustin's killed two good fellows and grabbed the horses. Happened yesterday, I'd say. Maybe he didn't know

till then that most of our outfit was away from camp. We'll leave this herd in the trap and go after the gang. Get 'em all this time. I reckon Shel drove our other bunch to his main camp."

Riding out a little later, leaving the second herd unguarded since he meant to finish the Tustin gang, Wycherly was puzzled when the horse tracks twisted at right angles to the direction in which Shel's big camp lay. They rode steadily until late afternoon, finding themselves close to a ranch boundary. Something was wrong here. Whole sections of the cowman's line fence lay tangled on the ground, and in the shallow creek beyond, Vince spied two or three dead horses.

"This don't look good to me," he scowled, "but the trail leads straight on."

As he spurred into the creek, a Colt bellowed from a brush clump on the far bank. The bullet struck the water in front of Wycherly's horse. He filled his hand and kept going, crying to the others, "Fan out!" He dropped a slug into the brush, and three .45's roared back at him. It looked as if Shel's men were waiting for them. Vince stopped in midstream, raked the brush with searching lead. Three men broke cover and zigzagged for some rocks below the creek. One fellow limped badly. Before Wycherly could thumb hammer Elaine splashed to his side, shrilling:

"Hold it, Vince! I know those boys. They punch cows for Sid Polk."

Wycherly's gun pointed down. "Why they shootin' at us?"

Elaine was peering across the stream. She leveled an arm. "I think that's Polk himself coming. He's a friend of Dad's. Let me talk to him."

A horseman had appeared suddenly over a distant swell and was quirting toward the creek. Wycherly said, "I'll ride with you, Elaine. Rest of the outfit stay back."

They crossed the stream. Polk had reined in as his three cowhands pelted to intercept him. He turned angry eyes on Vince and the girl as they loped up, roaring, "Ain't you horse hunters done enough damage without tryin' to kill off my hands?"

CHAPTER V

WYCHERLY shot back at the cowman, "Maybe you'd better explain why your men fired on us first, Polk! Bushed up, too."

"It's so, Mr. Polk," Elaine put in "They gave us no warning, just opened up with their smoke-machines. We thought it was Tustin's gang."

"Tustin's catchin' horses for Asa Lipscomb," said the cowman. "I didn't know you were with this other crowd, Elaine. But—" he glared at Wycherly—"old Bronco Buckner will have a big damage suit on his hands when I know exactly how I stand. I heard in McKittrick's Bar that the show had to close and Buckner needed horses. And you ought to be shot, Wycherly, for loosin' them wild mustangs on my range!"

Vince's eyes narrowed. "Why would I do that?"

"Takin' a short cut to Wagontongue, I reckon. Maybe the horses got out of hand after you dropped the fence, but that's no excuse. You had no business tryin' to cross my range. All my cattle stampeded and most of the boys are still out roundin' 'em up. But you know that! Your gang sneaked off after you seen the trouble you caused. Surprises me you came back."

While the cowman raged, several things were cleared up in Wycherly's mind. "What makes you so sure we did it, Polk?"

"Why," snapped the other, "we backtracked some, and the trail of that horse herd came from the direction of your camp. It's nearer my ranch than Tustin's main trap, anyway. Ain't denyin' they were your horses, are you?"

Vince shook his head. "But if you'd backtracked farther, you'd have found two dead riders. We'd hardly kill our own men. We just got back from the mountains. No, Polk, it wasn't my outfit drove those horses onto your range. It was Shel Tustin. We fought him to a standstill once, so, in order to have the basin to himself, he aimed to embroil us with a cattleman. He wants to be sure of fillin' his contract with Lipscomb. Shel's scheme nearly worked. It's just luck that nobody was killed when your punchers jumped us awhile ago."

The three cowhands, standing beside their boss, were listening open-mouthed. Polk glanced at them, scratching his chin, then his eyes swung to Elaine. "Is it all true, what Wycherly says."

"Every word of it, Mr. Polk," the girl told him. "I guess you haven't heard how Tustin cut up while he was with the show."

The misdeeds of Tustin, as recounted by Elaine, amazed Polk. "That feller is flirtin' with a hangnoose," he said. "I'm sorry my boys shot at you, but they were mad. A few of your horses got killed. We rounded up the rest, penned 'em at the ranch. Would've used rifles on the bunch, but held them to put in a claim against Buckner. Looks as if Lipscomb is the man I'll have to sue and I don't much like to, seein' what he aims to do for the basin settlers. If you want them mustangs, Wycherly, take' em and good riddance."

It snowed that night, just enough to cover the basin with a thin white blanket. Starting at daylight, Wycherley's outfit drove the recaptured horse herd to Wagontongue. With the two herds he would have enough horses for Buckner's needs. He'd leave some of the crew to build corrals near town where the animals could be broken at leisure, then he'd go out and settle with Tustin, and bring in the second bunch of horses from the waterhole.

THE weather had turned clear and cold, too cold for people to loiter on Wagontongue's sidewalks. But heads popped from doorways as Vince and Elaine rode up the street with the wagon trailing behind them. The herd was being held at the edge of town until suitable shelter could be found. Seeing who the riders were, the townsmen shouted greeting and withdrew their heads.

"What's the matter with those fellows?" Vince remarked. "They looked kind of scary. Each was fistin' a gun."

"And seemed relieved when they saw us," Elaine said. "Maybe they were expecting bandits.'

She wasn't far wrong. At the door of the hardware store, where the pair dismounted, Elaine's parents and a tall man with a law badge were peering out. The girl kissed her father and mother, then said to the badge-toter, "Hello, Sheriff Duncan, when did you come down?"

"This mornin', Miss Hubbard. Wish I had got here last night. Your father sent me word last month that a bad hombre named Tustin was around these parts. But being busy with one thing and another, I didn't come right away."

"Tustin," explained Gabe Hubbard, "rode in for supplies about dark. He tried to hold up several merchants, force them to load his wagon at gun's point, when they wouldn't sell him nothin'."

"Why wouldn't they?" Wycherly asked.

"Because," answered Hubbard, "with winter settin' in and no certainty when a freighter will show up with more goods, storekeepers are holdin' what they have for regular customers. We ganged up on Tustin's outfit and chased 'em off. We thought, when we heard you folks comin, it might be them again. Duncan, this young fellow is Vince Wycherly."

"Sheriff," said Vince, "there's a lot more Tustin has done. I can tell you about it on the way to his camp.

But first my outfit has got to eat."

Three guards, the only men at Tustin's big horse trap, made off at a gallop when they saw the sheriff and Wycherly coming with a posse. Presumably, Tustin and the rest of his gang were out seeking supplies, since they had failed to obtain any at Wagontongue. Duncan said he'd wait for Tustin's return, keeping the townsmen who were with the posse.

Wycherly's horse hunters headed west, not sure whether they'd find the last catch of mustangs at their waterhole camp. But the animals hadn't been disturbed. Next day, under a lowering sky, they hazed the bunch toward Wagontongue, going by way of Tustin's camp. The sheriff had waited in vain for the gang to show up. The three who had escaped must have warned Shel. It was beginning to snow, so Duncan's party joined the horse hunters.

A few of Wycherly's hands had erected a huge pole corral on the town's outskirts by the time he drove in the second herd. All that remained was to build a breaking pen. But the storm delayed them. It snowed for nearly thirty-six hours. Wagontongue was worrying about its food supply when a six-horse Concord coach, the first of its kind to reach Rising Sun Basin, plowed through the main street drifts and disgorged two passengers.

Vince Wycherly slogged forward, letting out a surprised whoop, as he saw Bronco Buckner alight from the stage. "Didn't expect to see you, boss! We've rounded up the horses for you and will start breakin' 'em soon."

"That's good hearin', Vince!" exclaimed the old showman. "I got restless at winter quarters, thought I'd check on how you were makin' out. Got a ride on the first stagecoach to Risin' Sun Basin. This gent—" he indicated the smiling man beside him —"is Asa Lipscomb. He—"

"Oh, I've heard of Mr. Lipscomb and what he's doin' for the basin country," Vince interrupted with a grin. "I wish he'd started a wagonload of supplies this way. We're on short rations."

TOWNSPEOPLE were gathering in the snowy street, excited by the arrival of the stage. Recognizing Lipscomb, they shouted his name. He waved his hand and spoke loud enough for everyone to hear.

"You'll be glad to hear that two freighters, loaded to the guards, are somewhere up the trail. They should arrive tomorrow." The crowd cheered wildly, and Lipscomb continued, speaking to Wycherly. "I'll have more coaches and freight wagons running soon if Shel Tustin has fulfilled his contract to round up horses. I understand from Mr. Buckner," said Lipscomb, his brow furrowed, "that Tustin is an outlaw. I didn't know."

Buckner looked sharply at Vince. "Shel had been up to more deviltry?"

"That's his specialty, boss." Wycherly told them of Tustin's activities in the basin, bringing a dismayed look to Lipscomb's face, while the old showman cursed Shel for a troublemaker. "The law will catch up with Tustin shortly, Mr. Lipscomb, but he corralled quite a bunch of horses. And likely that cowman, Sid Polk, won't be too hard on you. He'll settle out of court."

"My boys will help you with your horses, Lipscomb," said Buckner, then he thought of something and turned. "Where's my star girl performer?" he bawled, casting his eye over the crowd. He caught sight of a fluttering hand.

"Just got here, boss!" cried Elaine. "How's the weather in Texas?"

By sundown the following day, the two freight wagons hadn't put in an appearance. The snow-blocked trails could have caused the delay, but Wycherly thought Shel Tustin's gang might be responsible. If they had sighted the wagons, they would hardly have hesitated to hold them up for needed supplies. Vince said he'd take some of the hands and look for the

freighters next day. But an hour after dark, the cracking of blacksnake whips and the whining of wagon wheels sounded on the frosty air. The big freighters lurched into Wagontongue, each hauled by a ten-mule team.

Wycherly was first to reach the lead wagon as it halted. The fur-capped teamster leaned from the saddle of the nigh-wheeler, his breath smoking as he rumbled, "If your name's Wycherly, watch out! There's a guntotin' gang made us bring 'em in under the tarps!"

Vince backed away, raising his eyes to the wagon top, his hand going to his gun. The tarpaulin had been swept aside, and shadowy forms were dropping over the far side of the vehicle. Shel Tustin's outfit, bent on a surprise smokefest!

The last man on top of the load evidently recognized Wycherly. His gunhand went up and muzzle fire blossomed. Vince's Colt banged red-tongued reply. The lead-bitten figure swayed, perilously close to the sideboards on the left. Losing his balance, the man plunged downward to crunch headfirst through the snow crust. Vince could hear the footsteps of the others, scuttling to the rear of the wagon.

Lipscomb and Buckner, with a sprinkling of show riders and townsmen, were converging on the two freighters. "Look out for Tustin's gang!" yelled Wycherly, then he caught movement at the end of the lead wagon. The slam of two Colts sounded as one. A man-shape reeled clear of the wagon body, dropped in the snow. Mules on the jerkline added their braying to the din and lunged forward.

The Tustin gang kept pace with the moving wagon, hugging what shelter it offered while churning lead at Wycherly. The mustanger had been struck, but he wasn't down. Another of his enemies lay in the wake of the wagon.

THREE guns were popping as the turning wheels brought the freighter's rear end closer. The mules slipped and slid. One or two went down in tangled harness, but the pull on the rocking vehicle was more or less steady. Vince's lead silenced a gun, the targeted man falling to his knees with a half-scream. That left two barking Colts. Vince hoped Shel was wielding one, if he hadn't already got him. Tustin might have been with the second wagon, which, by the clamor of six-guns downstreet, had discharged its gunman freight.

The big rear wheel slid past, whining with the cold. Guns belched smoky lead. Vince was close to the ground as he fired. His bullet hit a man in the belly. He knew by the way the fellow clapped both hands to his midsection. From behind the stricken killer another shot blazed out, briefly lighting a face that wrenched exultant words from Vince's lips.

"You're long overdue, Shel!"

Wycherly put his last slug into Tustin and saw him flop down beside the gun-shot man, Shel's gun winking once. Vince reloaded and stepped over the deep wagon track. But Shel was through, his bragging mouth closed forever. The second jerkline had turned at right angles, stopping with the leaders nosing a store front.

The Colt clamor died away as Wycherly walked down the street. He bumped into Lipscomb and Buckner. The former was berating the freighter for allowing the gunmen to ride in on his load.

"We'd 'a' got shot if we hadn't, Mr. Lipscomb," protested the wagoneer.

"What was Tustin aimin' to do, clean up the town?" said Buckner. He turned quickly as Wycherly answered his question.

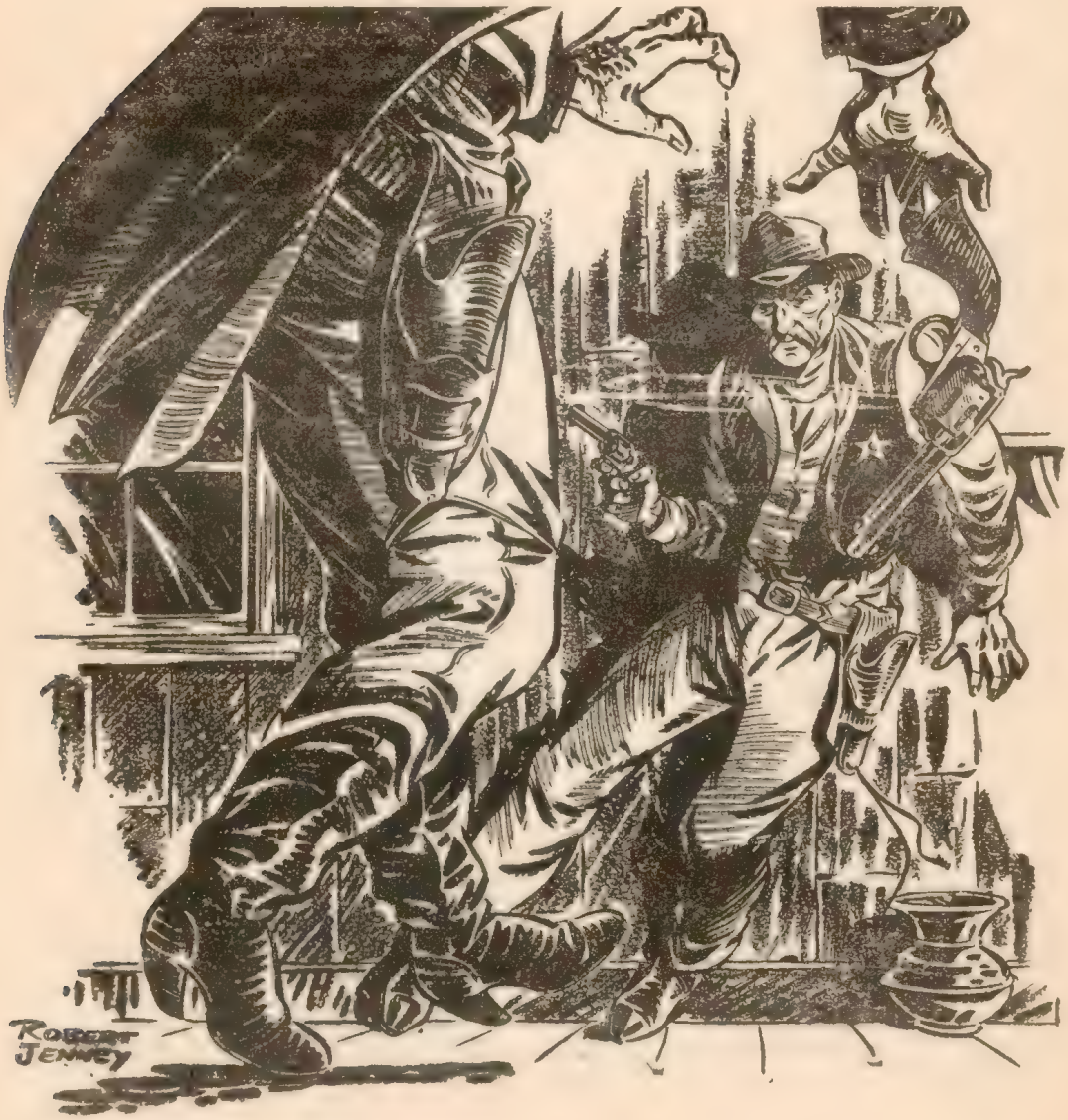
"Just the sheriff and us horse hunters, I reckon. With us out of the way, Shel would've gained time to finish his roundup. He hoped he'd made trouble enough to hold me by stampedin'

(Continued on page 45)

The corpse in the barber shop pointed the finger of guilt at Sheriff Mongold's only son. And the old man savvied that if he didn't soon find another killer's clue, he couldn't much longer ignore the angry shouts of . . .

Sheriff, Hang Your Son!

By Glenn Low



LISTENING to the talk dying around him, Sheriff Dave Mongold's brain rang with the latest words of his jailed son. *We know I didn't kill Millicent's uncle, Dad! You was with me when he died! Dad, you've got to make them believe us!*

That was it. He had to convince Judge Hoke Hymont, Marshal Larrs

Smith, and Doc Emery that Billy hadn't committed murder. He had to, or else he'd have to hang his own flesh and blood, because Billy had forced him to promise if his arrest led to a hanging, he, father of the doomed, would fix the noose and spring the trap.

Marshal Smith turned cold eyes on the old sheriff's worried face and said, "Tell it over again, Dave—just like you did before."

"You want to hear it again," the sheriff said with bitterness, "it suits me to tell it again. But it won't be any different. A true tale tells right ever' time." He drew a loose breath and fastened clear gray eyes on Judge Hoke's beefy face as he spoke.

"Billy was aimin' to skedaddle out of Concho Springs because Millicent King told him she wouldn't see him any more. Him and me left his barber shop at seven to go for a walk and talk things over. I told him Millicent was only tryin' to avoid trouble 'twixt him and her uncle Mallard when she gave him the mitten that way, and when I'd argued for an hour he finally decided to stay here and go on with his barberin'. We got back to the shop around eight, and—"

The sheriff became silently thoughtful, pausing so long that Judge Hoke said, "Billy pulled down the blinds and blew out the lamp before you left the barber shop, but when you got back the lamp was burning. Ain't that what you said right at first?"

Sheriff Dave nodded. "We found Mallard's corpse just like you saw it later, boys," he said. "Sprawled in Billy's new barber chair with its throat cut from jowl to brisket. The big mirror had been knocked off the back wall and most of the barberin' stuff was scattered around.

"It looked like they'd been a fight, but accordin' to Dude Torney, Mallard was staggerin', blubberin' drunk when he left the Concho Bar to go to the barber shop to tell Billy to stay away from his niece. It might be that Mallard caused all the tear-up in the shop by staggerin' and fallin' around."

"You want us to believe the Bar-M owner cut his own gullet, don't you, sheriff?" Marshal Smith lisped dryly.

THE lean, hungry-eyed district official had been the sheriff's enemy for years, claiming the local lawman had clipped him out of a reward once, when the sheriff had outshot a desperado the marshal had hesitated to meet in open combat. It had been the marshal who had arrested Billy Mongold for murder, and who was now determined to see his suspect hanged.

"Lin Brasett saw Mallard go inside the barber shop," replied Sheriff Dave, fighting to control the anger that welled within him. He says Mallard was by hisself. Brasett could see inside the shop when Mallard staggered through the door, and he says nobody was in there."

"Brasett's a drunkard and a liar," said the marshal. "The citizens of Concho Springs ain't saddle-broke to ridin' along on his lies, Mongold. You think Lin Brasett's word is better'n Doc Emery's is?" He sneered contemptuously, as at the mere suggestion of such a possibility, nodded at dapper Dr. Emery and said: "Tell us about the shadders on the window blind again, doc."

"I walked by the barber shop just before eight o'clock," the doctor said in a soft, unruffled voice. "Two men were inside and the door was closed. I'm sure there were two men inside because I saw two man-made shadows moving on the drawn window shade."

Marshal Smith nodded his satisfaction, grinned at the thwarted face of the old law-dog and said: "There it is, Mongold. Mallard King stood in the way of your son's marriage to his niece and only heir, Millicent King. So your son slit King's throat. I don't blame you for tellin' tales to save your own flesh and blood from the hangrope, but—"

Old Dave was upon the leering marshal like a crazy panther, clutching his throat and slamming blows at his face.

One smash landed fairly on the cold-eyed badgeman's beaked nose before Judge Hoke and Doc Emery pulled the fierce old law-dog back out of fist range.

The marshal, pale as ashes, blood trickling across his upper lip, glared cold hate at the sheriff. "Just like your son, fly off the handle when you git hot under the neckband. I reckon if you'd 've had a razor you'd have sliced my gullet, same as your son did old Mallard's."

Sheriff Dave slapped the bulging, thonged down holster on his thigh. "Your life, marshal," he said, slicing his words, "is here, lidded with lead in a brass jacket. If I wanted to take it, I could."

He moved to his office door, jerked it open. "Git out'n here—all three of you! You're dead set on indictin' Billy for the killin', and nothin' I can say'll change your minds. Git on out'n here!"

They hustled to obey. Doc Emery was last to fill the door. Sheriff Dave said to him, "You're still a stranger in Concho Springs, doc. I'm thinkin' might be you knowed Mallard King long years ago before he came here. Maybe south on the Nueces. Seems Mallard was oncommonly worried when you turned up in these parts. Maybe seein' you, he got a ache in his memory."

Emery flashed back an unworried smile. "I didn't know him before arriving here, sheriff. You'll be a fool to try to prove that I did."

SHERIFF DAVE slammed the door after them, stood a minute with his gnarled hand on the knob, thinking over the business of this evening. He couldn't figure Emery. If the man was lying about the shadows on the window shade, why? Was he in cahoots with the marshal for some hidden reason? Was the marshal out to break his administration as sheriff by putting a noose around his son's neck. Or had Lin Brasett lied again? Yesterday Mallard had slapped the barfly in the mouth when Brasett gave him some back talk.

Maybe Brasett had seen somebody waiting for Mallard in the barber shop and lied to save the killer because he hated Mallard? Or had the Bar-M owner simply carried out his long-standing threat to kill himself, doing it in a fashion that would put a rope around the neck of the son of the man he hated.

"Mallard knowed I knowed he was a cattle thief," the old law-dog told himself, "and he hated me because of it. It would be his way if he was killin' himself to do it in a way that would hurt me and prevent Billy and Millicent gettin' married."

He shrugged helplessly, his eyes glum with bafflement. "Got to save my boy," he mumbled, his long-lipped mouth going slack beneath his floppy mustache. "Got to—he's innocent. I know blame well he is."

He moved from door to window, glanced out in time to see his recent visitors entering the Concho Bar across the street, then looked at his watch. "Hum-m-m," he muttered. "Time that gal's gittin' out of here and goin' over to the hotel."

He left the office, passing through a rear door into the dimly lighted jail annex. Back at the cell block, Millicent King said, "Here comes your dad, Billy."

In spite of his best efforts, despair worked in the sheriff's smile as he stopped at his son's cell. Millicent, small, trim, dark-haired, saw what the old lawman's smile sought to conceal, and winced.

"Things ain't goin' so good, son," Sheriff Dave said. "Tomorrow when court opens you'll be indicted for murder. Marshal Smith's proddin' the judge, and the stuff Doc Emery's tellin' about seein' shadders don't help us none."

Billy's slender frame tensed. He was a handsome youth, though slight of build. He wasn't husky enough to withstand rigorous work, a fact of which he was bitterly conscious. Mil-

licent had encouraged him to take up barbering, and, until her uncle interfered, was trying to talk him into entering a law office in Denver. "You've got the brains, Billy!" she'd told him once proudly. "Read law with old Judge Harmer in Denver a few years, then go into the profession on your own. Try, and you'll go places! Maybe to the governor's mansion some day."

Now the pretty brunette put a hand on the sheriff's arm and said, "If things get too dark you'll free Billy, won't you, Sheriff Dave? Free him some dark night when I'm waiting behind the jail with an extra horse—so he can ride with me across the border. You will! You must! You must, because you know he's innocent!"

Looking at his son, the sheriff wagged his head. "No. They're honest in the belief of your guilt, Billy boy. Doc Emery says he saw two man-shadders on the blind at the barber shop window. Somebody was inside with old Mallard. Emery says so. They think you killed Mallard because he was breakin' up you and Millicent."

"But, Dad, Lin Brasett says nobody was in the shop when Mallard got there, that he was across the street all the time, and nobody went in until we did."

THE sheriff nodded drearily. "Our tough luck, son. Practically anybody else in town would tell that tale, a jury'd believe it. But when Lin Brasett tells it, it's a lie by his tellin', and nobody will believe it. And for once, maybe for the first time in his life, I got a notion Brasett's tellin' the truth."

"Uncle Mallard threatened to kill himself just this morning," said Millicent. "He said Doc Emery coming here had convinced him of the wisdom of suicide. Could that mean—"

"Emery probably knows something black from Mallard's past," said the sheriff, interrupting her. "I guessed as much days ago, after noticin' the way Mallard's drinkin' picked up when the doc hit town. They did a heap of corner talkin', too—Mallard and Doc Emery."

"One thing sure," said Billy, "Doc Emery's lying about seeing any shadows on the barber shop window blind. Nobody could make shadows on the blind by walking around inside the shop. It'll be easy to prove he's lying, Dad."

Sheriff Dave's mouth dropped in astonishment and his eyes questioned fiercely as he waited for his son to explain.

"How, Billy?" Millicent hopefully asked.

"Why take Doc Emery there and let him try to throw some shadows himself. The lamp's got a metal tank with wall brackets soldered on, and it's bolted to the front wall. It couldn't be moved without removing the bolts, and if anybody did that it'll show. The window's in the same wall, so nobody could walk between the lamp and it and throw a shadow on the blind."

Disappointment shadowed the hope in Millicent's dark eyes; but the sheriff's expression, thanking Billy, was almost gloating. "Dangnation, yes!" he snorted. His smile spread boldly. "Looks to me, Billy boy, like you just now ducked the hangrope! It sure does so!"

He whipped around and started for the door, slowing down a bit to reply as Millicent ran to catch up. Billy asked where he was going. "To the barber shop," he said, "to make sure that blind can't catch a shadder. Then, in case it can't, I'm findin' that thimble-riggin' pill-pusher and slammin' his lies right back behind his purty white teeth!"

Out on the sidewalk, Millicent grasped the sheriff's sleeve. "Wait, Sheriff Dave!"

He paused, looked at her with puzzling eyes. The shadow was on this section of street, but he saw her face, tightly lined, and the fear that was a dismal light in her widening eyes. "Honey, you better git along over to the hotel," he said softly. "Ma Kenton'll take you under her wing 'til to-

morrow, then Billy can drive you home to the Bar-M. By tomorrow Billy'll be a free man."

"Not unless you free him illegally," she said in a trembling whisper.

He laughed confidently. "Doc Emery killed your uncle, honey. He knowed something fetchin' bad about Mallard and was makin' the old cowman pay for his silence. Mallard got tired of handin' out his cash and jumped Doc Emery, and the doc cut his throat, fixin' it so Billy would git the blame. It's a easy thing to see now —the way it happened, I mean. And if I ain't right, why did Doc Emery lie about the shadders?"

"He didn't," she said.

Her voice sounded far away, as if she'd spoken from some remote, unknown place. Her fingers trembled on his arm. "Huh?" he rasped astonishedly. "How's that, Millicent. What say?"

"Doc Emery told the truth about the shadows."

"Ye-ah? How you know he did?"

As she replied her whisper hoarsened, became tense. "I was near by when Uncle Mallard staggered from Dude Torney's saloon. When he made for Billy's barber shop I followed him, keeping to the shadows. I saw Lin Brasett leaning against a lamppost across the street. He saw Uncle Mallard go into the barber shop, just like he said."

HER whisper died and he waited for its death to give rise to a sob. He patted her hand and waited, thinking hard, wonder if she, an innocent—sweetly innocent—girl might have. . . . No! He would not permit such a malign thought to cross his mind. No!

She was whispering again. "Sheriff Dave, there *was no one* in the shop. I was close to Uncle Mallard. After he stepped inside he didn't close the door, so I stepped in behind him. He lit the lamp—like Billy says it's bolted to the wall between door and window—and I stepped out again before he noticed me.

"He closed the door after a while, but no one went in after I came out. And no one was in the barber shop, except, of course, Uncle Mallard. After he closed the door I started away to find Billy and warn him that Uncle was waiting for him in the shop. At the corner I glanced back, and—"

He cut in on her. "Brasett saw you —saw you go in behind your uncle and come out after the lamp was lit?"

Fear, prodded by anticipation of the ruinous experience that seemed to creep from out perfidious circumstance to attack and destroy this pretty, fresh-faced girl of the dark ringleted hair and soft, dark-hued eyes, dried and rustled the good sheriff's words. It rattled them like wind rattles the rot-severed buttons from the skeleton of a rattlesnake against the converging walls of his throat.

"I'd eat my badge before I'd hang a —a—" In time he realized what he was saying and shut his jaws on the word *girl.*

"Oh, please, Sheriff Dave, don't think that I—that I—"

He gripped her hand to silence her, to reassure himself, and said: "What'd you see when you looked back?"

"A pair of shadows on the window shade. The plainer one was Uncle Mallard's, I think."

"You see Doc Emery around anywhere?"

"Yes. He came downstreet, glanced at the shadows, moving on the shade, then came on and entered Dude Torney's saloon."

After a moment's silence the sheriff said, "Doc Emery's sweet on you, ain't he, Millicent? You and Billy fussed over him, I know. Did your uncle want you to marry him?"

"Yes," she whispered. "I told him I was going to marry Billy. It was then he said if I saw Billy again he'd kill him."

"Maybe Emery thinks if Billy hangs you'll come around to thinkin'

different about him. You're rich now, Millicent—with your uncle's ranch comin' to you. Emery might be a man to give heavy consideration to such a thing as that, especially when a pretty girl goes with the deal."

"Emery didn't kill Uncle Mallard," she said. "He didn't go inside the barber shop."

"Maybe he didn't need to," said the sheriff. He didn't explain when she asked him what he meant. He took her arm and they started over to the hotel. "You don't worry none," he said. "I still got a notion Billy'll be around in the mornin' to drive you home."

"You're wrong, Sheriff Dave," she said worriedly. "They'll convict and hang Billy if—if I don't do something about it."

He left her at the hotel in care of motherly Ma Kenton and hurried over to his son's barber shop.

BLOOD on the floor, on the barber chair, specks of it on the big mirror that had slipped its hook and was leaning crazily against a shelf—towels, combs, bottles of lotion and hair tonic scattered all over. "Sure looks like there was a fight," Sheriff Dave mumbled, staring around, as he shook out the match he'd used to light the lamp.

Five minutes later, after trying from every possible position to cast his shadow on the drawn window shade, he drew a long breath and grinned cheerlessly. He nodded, telling himself that his son was right, that it was impossible for anyone in here to throw a shadow on the shade unless the lamp were moved. And the condition of the bracket bolts plainly testified the lamp had not been tampered with.

He was remembering what he hadn't been able to forget—that Millicent had said no one was here when her uncle entered, yet double shadows had moved on the window shade a few moments later. He wagged his grizzled head, wondered what the girl had been thinking. Ghosts? What would a jury think of such a contradictory story? He decided to have another talk with Lin Brasett. Brasett had seen the shadows, if shadows there'd been. He'd choke the truth out of the booze bum if need be.

"Might be one of them shadders was made from outside somehow," he told himself. "Might be Doc Emery knows how."

He was reaching for the knob when the door opened and Dude Torney stepped in.

The flashily clad saloon proprietor's muscular face was set with a tight grin that matched the bleakly yawning muzzle of the forty-five he held in his fist.

"Howdy, sheriff," he said in a soothing voice as he reached back and closed and bolted the door.

"Git that smoker off'n me, Dude!" growled Sheriff Dave, his eyes glittering angrily.

Dude Torney's grin became ruthless. "I came for the jail keys, sheriff," he said. "My brothers are waitin' outside. Sam's loanin' your son his mount; Millicent King's ridin' her own horse when they streak out of here for the border. So hurry, lawman. The lady don't want to wait. And she's puttin' up the dinero for this show."

Sheriff Dave blinked in astonishment, then nodded understandingly. "Takin' things in her own hands, eh?" He reached to his hip pocket for the jail keys; and while his fingers fumbled there, his hand was only inches from the butt of his sheathed gun.

Dude nodded. "She's savin' your murderin' son from the hangnoose in the only way it can be done. So hustle with them keys."

The old law-dog did some rapid thinking. The Torneys would never take a chance at jailbreaking unless they had an out. He guessed at their out in this case. They'd wait until Millicent and Billy were gone, then kill him and tell they'd done it in a fight to prevent his freeing Billy.

"What's Millicent payin' you?" he asked, stalling for time.

"Plenty—her ranch," said the man with the drawn gun. "Old Mallard owed me a whisky and gamblin' debt. She told me to ante his account until it would top the price of the Bar-M. Then she made me out a paper that'll hold in court, since she's never comin' back to these parts. So hand over them keys."

The sheriff heard voices outside, knew Sam and Art Torney, toughs who worked at the Concho Bar for their tougher brother, were waiting there. "What happens to me after Billy and Millicent are gone?" he asked, bringing his hand partially from his pocket.

Dude's grin broke in a snarl. "You and me are stayin' here until Art and Sam get the girl and her killer-boy on their way. They'll be back after that, and we'll decide about your future. So give me them keys."

THE sheriff knew he was a dead man if he permitted Dude Torney to hold him here until his brothers returned. It was act now or never, and he acted in the way he'd acted so many times in the past—against a drawn gun.

He lifted the keys from his pocket, brought them six inches forward, dropped them, and dipped his hand. Dude sensed the draw before it was fairly begun and triggered lead.

The old law-dog gritted his teeth against the bullet's impact, whipping halfway around and tilting up his iron-laden fist. Dude's second shot spouted ceilingward as the lawman thumbed hammer. Going back on his heels, the sheriff saw Dude stiffen, claw out crazily at the wafting gunsmoke, fall. . . .

Sheriff Dave's back smashed the shelf, dislodging the teetering mirror. He turned just in time to catch it against his chest. Then, finding his balance, he took time to rehang it, up where it had been when Mallard King had staggered into the barber shop to his death. He returned on unsteady feet to the sprawled, motionless saloonkeeper. He'd removed Millicent's ranch-transferring paper from the pocket in Dude's shirt, was tearing it to bits, when the hammering began on the door.

"Dude! Dude!"

The sheriff glared at the door, remaining silent to Sam Torney's urgent cries. As the hammering continued he rose, reeled back to the barber chair and leaned against it, still glaring doorward.

Sam Torney suddenly changed his tune. "Sheriff Dave! We know you killed Dude. If he was alive, he'd answer. We're comin' to get you!"

The sheriff guessed the shooting had passed unheard. Certainly no one had been attracted by it or Sam and Art wouldn't still be out there. He glanced down at his bloody shirt, his shaking gun-hand, and knew he couldn't act to save himself if the Torneys crashed the door or broke the window.

"Get a rock, Art," he heard Sam say. "Smash the window, and we'll start sievin' him!"

The sheriff glanced at the shade-covered window, stiffened, his eyes bulging. As from far distant he heard Art Torney's excited voice, thinned with sudden fear. "Look, Sam! Look! The window, Sam!"

Sheriff Dave knew they saw what he saw—two man-shadows clearly silhouetted on the window shade.

"Somebody's with the sheriff!" he heard Art Torney gasp. "We better dust!"

He listened to them go. He moved, grinned weakly as the double shadow moved with him. He raised his gun with trembling hand and sent five slugs blasting into the ceiling. "That—that ought to fetch—fetch somebody," he murmured, and closed his eyes against the pain welling from within him. . . .

He was still there, leaning on the bloody barber chair, the smoking Colt in his hand, when Judge Hoke and

Marshal Smith, flanked by several men from the Concho Bar, came in.

"See! See—men?" He gasped and pointed at his double shadow on the window shade. "See—"

Open-mouthed, they looked at the shadow-marked shade, then turned their heads and stared into the mirror on the wall.

"Mallard did—did kill hisself!" the sheriff said in a hoarse whisper. "He was here by hisself. The two man-shadows on the blind was made by him and—and his own reflection in the lookin' glass. The light was reflected onto the blind by the mirror, and—and Mallard's reflection in the mirror and his shadder caught in the reflected light was throwed direct on the blind, like my reflection and shadder is right now. Any—anybody can see how it happened, and—"

Judge Hoke caught the sheriff as he swayed and crumpled. Marshal Larrs Smith stepped to where Sheriff Dave had been standing and nodded understandingly as he saw his shadow multiply itself on the drawn shade.

LATER the old law-dog awoke, gasped at the pain caused by Doc Emery's cool fingers probing his shoulder for Dude Torney's slug. He blinked up at the medico; and Emery grinned smoothly.

"Easy now, you old gun-fogger," the doctor cautioned.

The sheriff managed a stiff grin. "What'd you—you have on old Mallard, doc?" he asked, licking dry lips. "What made the old buzzard take to drink right after you hit town?"

In an unruffled voice Emery told him. "Mallard King was suffering from an incurable malady. When I told him the truth, he went to pieces. The way he was drinking I half expected him to commit suicide. But after seeing two shadows on the window shade I truly believed he'd been murdered. And I'd have countinued to believe it if you hadn't shown us how one man can make two shadows."

A slight rustle caused the sheriff to turn his head. "Hullo, honey," he whispered, finding Millicent King's pale, anxious face above him.

"Oh, Sheriff Dave!" the girl murmured. "Dude Torney'll live. He's got a severe head wound, but Doctor Emery promises he'll pull through, and—"

"And if he'd died, you'd feel responsible—which would be right foolish," said the sheriff.

"I had no idea we'd be leaving you in the lurch," hurried on the girl. "Billy told me they'd probably kill you after we were gone, I started out to find Dude Torney and call off the deal. "Billy wouldn't have gone, anyway. It was terribly stupid of me, but I thought—"

She became quiet as Billy Mongold's face appeared at her shoulder, falling in his dad's line of vision. The two men smiled at each other.

"What time is it, doc?" Sheriff Dave asked.

"Around four in the morning," replied the doctor. "But you don't need to know; you're not going anywhere for a week or so."

Sheriff Dave looked at Millicent, smiled, then looked at Billy, still smiling. "I reckon the marshal let you out of your cell, son," he said. "Which was fittin' and proper, seein' as how he was the laddie-buck what locked you there. Now, if it's all the same to you, I'd like for you to drive Millicent out to the Bar-M. I like to keep my promises, and I promised her you'd drive her home this mornin'."

He closed his eyes, a very satisfied man. He didn't even open them when Millicent kissed him. He just kept them closed and kissed her back.

Once a gambler, always a gambler—that's what Dan Larrigan's girl warned him. For he wanted pay dirt without grubbing for it. But when Larrigan got mixed up in that fake bonanza deal, it proved to be the . . .

Last Chance for a Tinhorn

By Joseph Chadwick

THE *Silver Belle's* twin stacks puffed live sparks and lurid flame into the night, and its huge paddles churned furiously at the murky water. The packet's skipper was on a record run, gambling his craft against a few minutes' gain. In the gaudy main saloon, filled with a gay throng, another sort of gambling was under way—a stiff sort of gambling that forced Dan Larrigan to quit the game after a very few hands.

He was smiling as he said, "I've feathered your nests tonight, so you gentlemen won't mind if I now retire."

He'd lost twelve hundred dollars,

but his disarming manner kept the other card players from guessing the truth: that he had lost the whole of his poke. Not until he was alone on deck, lighting a cheroot did he show the ugly mood that had taken hold of him. But he could blame nobody but himself. He hadn't been able to curb that tinhorn streak in his nature. He had paid dearly for sitting in on that game in the hope of making a killing.

"Damn a man's weakness!" he muttered aloud, and flung his unsmoked cheroot to the dark water sliding so swiftly past the packet's flat hull.

It was then that the explosion came. The *Silver Belle's* master had lost his senseless gamble. Bursting boilers ripped the fore part of the boat apart, from hull to Texas deck—smashing the wheelhouse, killing the skipper and two of the crew. Screams rang out from passengers scalded by loosed steam, and flames leaped high. Dan Larrigan was only dimly aware of all that. The terrific blast had thrown him to the deck. He lay dazed.

Panicky passengers from salon and cabins rushed by him, some screaming in hysteria. Dan groaned and tried to get up, his reeling brain hearing the cry that was louder than the rest: "Fire!"

He gripped the railing, dragged himself up, stood swaying. He saw the red glare, the roaring flames. The whole forward part of the boat was afire, and the wind was driving the flames back along every deck. Dan turned and staggered aft. He saw crazed passengers jumping over the side. He came to a companionway, lurched down it.

Below, on the cargo deck, jammed with piled-up freight and a motley crowd of poor boomers and immigrant folk, was bedlam. Men, women, and children were milling, shoving, fighting, screaming. A boomer woman thrust against Dan, gasped, "Hold my baby, please. I've got to find my husband!"

A blanket-wrapped bundle was thrust into Dan Larrigan's arms. The woman turned away before he could protest, and the last Dan saw of her, she was fighting her way through the mob back along the deck, back toward the roaring wall of flames.

DAN waited until he could wait no longer, until the oven heat and choking smoke forced him over the side with that tiny live bundle in his arms. He was still dazed from the pain in his head, and he never quite knew how he swam with the baby held high over his left shoulder.

It was a nightmare, his struggle in the water and his scramble up the high bank. The nightmare lasted on until dawn. Dan only vaguely remembered handing the baby to another survivor so that he could gather brush and wood to start a roaring fire, with matches kept dry in his silver pocket case, and keep the baby warm.

Afterward, at dawn, he marveled that his awkward hands had stripped the tiny figure of its wet blankets and clothes, and rubbed warmth back into the little body that had begun to turn blue. But by dawn the child was bundled again in its clothing and blankets which had been dried at the fire. It lay sleeping beside the fire, on a bed of brush.

There were other fires now, other survivors huddled about them. Dan went from one fire to another, seeking the baby's mother. His search ended as he had feared. The woman hadn't gotten off the *Silver Belle*, now a smoldering heap of wreckage out on the river. Dan turned to the few other women, those who had saved themselves, but none of them would take the baby. They were too miserable, had lost too much, to take on the burden. The jolting realization came to Dan Larrigan that the responsibility was his. He was stuck with that baby boy!

It was still a nightmare. Dan's head ached and throbbed with every step he took, and he walked half a dozen miles before he came to a farm. By then the baby was crying and sucking at its tiny fist because of its hunger.

At the farmhouse door, Dan said, "I've got to have some milk."

The farmer said, "You've come to the right place, friend."

Dan's destination had been the mining camp of Shamrock, twelve miles farther upriver and two more west along Rocker Creek. The town was a collection of plank buildings and tents and lean-to's scattered for a mile through a rock-walled gulch. Dan reached Shamrock, in the farmer's wagon, late in the afternoon. The farmer reined in his team, saying:

"Reckon I'd better turn back now."

Dan climbed down, the baby held against his left shoulder. He took his watch from his pocket, found that it still ticked despite the soaking in the river. He lay the watch on the wagon seat, though the farmer objected.

"I'm not asking for pay."

"I want you to have it, friend," Dan said, and took the pail of milk the farmer handed down to him.

They parted, Dan walking on into Shamrock. He was known here, remembered even though he'd been away a year. Men left their claims by Rocker Creek, hurried to ask questions and peer at the baby. Shamrock had already heard of the riverboat disaster.

A miner asked, "What are you going to do with the kid, Larrigan?"

And Dan said truthfully, "I don't know."

He did know that Shamrock was an almost womanless town. There were a couple of honkytonk girls at the Nugget Bar & Café. One miner had a Mexican wife, a known shrew. Another man had a wife who was sickly. None of them could be asked to take an orphan child. There was only Kathie Hanlon. She might care for the baby, though it had been Kathie who had said, a year ago, "Dan, you're a born tinhorn and you'll never change." Kathie might not want to do favors for him, yet it wasn't in her to be unkind.

MOST of the people of Shamrock had peered at the cherubic, blue eyed bundle—the town's very first baby—before Dan reached the Hanlon claim. It was at the west end of the town, and the tidiest spot in the bleak gulch. Bert Hanlon worked his claim, but he was a carpenter by trade and so had built his small house with care. Kathie had curtains at the windows, a carefully tended flower bed at the side, and no litter anywhere about. She was at the door when Dan arrived, and immediately held out her arms for the child.

Her eyes glowed. There was soft music in her voice. "Dan, he's wonderful! Why, he can't be more than three months old!"

She was a blond girl of twenty and wonderful, too, in Dan Larrigan's eyes. Not even in Sacramento or Frisco had he seen a prettier girl than Kathie Hanlon, She was a smiling girl, but she could be grave—and sometimes, it always seemed to Dan, a bit too knowing. It had been she who sent him away from Shamrock a year ago; it was because of her that he had returned. As he followed her inside, he knew that it was only because of the baby that she had welcomed him back.

Dan heard her say, "I'm sure you need tending to, you darling." and he watched her lay the baby on the homemade table and care for it. She was far too busy to talk to him. She heated water, bathed the child, laughed delightedly as it made cooing sounds. She warmed some of the milk and with difficulty fed the tiny mouth from a spoon. She rocked her charge to sleep. It all took nearly three hours.

She faced Dan then, as though

only now really aware of him—and that he was just back after a year's absence. "I'll keep him, Dan, if you'll let me." She was gazing bravely at him. "I'm surprised to see you here."

"I said I'd come back, Kathie."

"And I said you shouldn't come back," Kathie replied. "I liked you, Dan—I was fond of you. But we're not the same sort. I believe it's not too bad to be poor and honest. But you want to get rich, no matter how. You want a bonanza, but you hate hard work. You're afraid to soil your hands. You'd rather be a tinhorn promoter than a prospector. You want pay dirt without grubbing for it."

She shook her head. "No, Dan, we're not the same sort. Go back to your selling worthless mining stock and salted mines to unwary boomers—to losing your ill-won money at gambling!"

"All right, Kathie."

"It's better that I keep the baby. I'll bring him up properly."

"I'll pay for his keep. I'll send you money."

"There's no need for you to do that."

Dan rose from his chair, stood turning his hat around and around in his hands. It would do no good to tell Kathie that he had spent the past year at honest work, with a freighting firm at Sacramento, for he had no stake to prove it. And he couldn't convince her that he had changed, for he hadn't. That game aboard the *Silver Belle* had proved he was still a tinhorn. He had entered it to make a killing, not for an hour's innocent pleasure.

Kathie said, "There's no use trying to find words to change my mind. I may as well tell you now that George Ryland has asked me to marry him."

That jolted Dan Larrigan. He could not help being bitter as he grudgingly said, "Well, there's nothing I can say against George Ryland."

"You should be more like him."

"Why should I bother?" Dan said angrily. "You've made your choice."

He turned away before she could see how badly he felt.

FROM Kathie's house, Dan went back to the center of town and turned into George Ryland's merchandise store—the only one in Shamrock. Ryland operated a heavily stocked business, but it was a store as orderly as the man's mind. George Ryland was a careful man, a shrewd merchant. A tall, solid, handsome man of thirty, Ryland was busy with a customer when Dan entered.

He nodded at Dan and smiled. "Be with you in a minute, Larrigan."

When the customer was gone, he gave Dan his hand and said, "Glad to see you back. Heard about the baby you saved from the riverboat. What can I do for you?"

He hoped to make a sale, but Dan removed the cameo ring he wore on his left hand. He held the ring up for Ryland's inspection, and said, "I'm flat broke, George. I lost everything on the *Silver Belle*. A year ago you offered to buy my ring. Do you still want it?"

Ryland was always the shrewd trader. He said slowly, "I offered you five ounces of dust for it. That's a lot of dust. Besides, my wanting the ring was just a whim."

"Four ounces," Dan said. "Take it or leave it."

"All right, four ounces," Ryland replied. "And I'll add a drink to the price. It's my closing time. We'll go over to the Nugget."

The trade was made, and when they left the store, Dan had a four-ounce poke in his pocket and Ryland was wearing, with some pride, the handsome cameo ring. They crossed the street at an angle, entered the combination saloon and restaurant. It was only six o'clock, but the place was already well filled with men in from their claims for a meal and some drinks. A wooden store box stood on the bar, and a burly red-

bearded miner, Hank Burton, pointed to it.

"We've raised a fund for your kid, Larrigan," he said. "We figured it'd be a good thing since he's Shamrock's first baby. There's not much pay dirt being taken out of the Rocker, but everybody contributed. There must be close to five thousand dollars in dust in that box."

Dan looked about at those grinning miners. They were hard-looking men, but they had kindly natures. He grinned back and said, "Looks like the drinks are on me, boys."

He took out the poke George Ryland had given him for the ring.

Matt Keefer came limping in just in time to claim his free drink. He was a bewhiskered old prospector who for a brief time, years ago, had been a bonanza king. Broke now, he roamed the mountains in quest of another lucky strike. He downed his drink, wiped his matted beard on his coat sleeve, and said:

"Heard about the baby, gents. Fine thing, that fund you're raising."

A miner said jokingly, "How about donating a poke, Matt?"

"I'd sure like to, but I ain't got enough dust to buy a plug of tobacco," the old codger said. "Tell you what—" he dug into ragged clothes and brought out a worn paper—"I'll throw this in. It's a certificate for a thousand shares of stock in the Royal Mining Company."

Hank Burton chuckled. "Matt, you know blamed well the Royal Mine is a *borrasco*."

"I don't know it. All I know it that the company is still in existence It just stopped working its property when they didn't strike the mother lode. I paid a hundred dollars a share for this stock, back in the days when money didn't mean much to me."

"You figure it'll be worth something again, sometime?" Burton asked.

"Not in my time," old Matt muttered. "But I kept this worthless paper on a hunch. Maybe my hunch is no good, maybe it is. I'd like to sign it over to the kid. Barkeep, fetch pen and ink."

THE bartender set out a pen and an ink bottle. Hank Burton hid a grin as he said, "Seems like robbing you, Matt, but that hard-luck kid will sure be grateful. What's his name, Larrigan?"

"I don't know," Dan told him. "I never heard any of the survivors mention his parents' name. We'll have to name him ourselves."

George Ryland broke in, "Let's call him Danny Larrigan. It's as good a name as any we could think up. Besides, Dan rescued him. That sort of makes him Dan's son by adoption."

"It's all right by me," Dan said, "if nobody else objects."

"Danny Larrigan, it is!" Hank Burton exclaimed. "Come on, Matt; sign your paper over to young Danny Larrigan!"

It was a joke for Burton and the other men of Shamrock, but Dan saw that George Ryland, though smiling, had an odd look in his eyes. Dan was puzzled by that speculative look, and surprised when Ryland said, as old Matt Keefer labored with the pen:

"This calls for another round of drinks. This time it's on me."

Dan was surprised because he'd never known George Ryland to lay out money without the hope of a profit. It looked as though the prospect of marrying Kathie Hanlon had made a changed man of him.

Later, Dan sat alone at a corner table and idled away the time with a game of solitaire. George Ryland had gone to call on Kathie—to see the baby, he had said. The rest of the crowd was back at their customary evening pursuits, drinking and talking, gambling a little and playing up to the Nugget's percentage girls. Dan was alone because he wanted to think things out. He had to decide what his next step was to be. With

Kathie planning to marry Ryland, there was no reason for him to remain in Shamrock.

The baby was no longer a problem. Kathie had taken it right to her heart, and it appeared that George Ryland, her husband-to-be, did not object to the child's being in her care. The fund Hank Burton had raised would pay for young Danny's keep for several years, and Dan could send more money later on. No, there was no reason why he should remain in Shamrock. The dust Ryland had paid him for the cameo ring would take him downriver and stake him to a new start. Dan told himself he would leave in the morning.

It was George Ryland who changed his mind for him. The merchant returned to the Nugget a little after nine o'clock. He came directly to where Dan sat.

"Since you're broke, maybe you'd like to go in on a deal with me," Ryland suggested.

"What sort of a deal?"

"A hundred-thousand-dollar deal."

"Did you say—"

"Let's talk it over in private, at my store." Ryland's voice was low, casual, but that speculative look was still in his eyes.

Dan said warily, "All right. I'll listen to what you've got to say."

He rose and followed Ryland from the saloon. They crossed to the store, entered, made their way to the cubbyhole office at the rear. Ryland lighted the lamp, gave Dan a cheroot, took another for himself.

When they'd lighted up, he said, "It's that stock, Larrigan."

"Keep talking, George."

"It's worthless now, as everybody knows, but we could make it worth a fortune. The idea came to me when Old Matt offered to sign it over to the kid. You willing to pay me half of what those thousand shares sell for?"

"Half is a big cut."

"But the idea's mine. Without it, your stock is worthless."

"It's not my stock. It belongs to the kid."

Ryland waved that aside with an easy gesture. "I fixed it so the baby has your name. Dan or Danny—what's the difference? Besides, everybody considers him your son by adoption."

"All right, you'll get half what the stock brings."

Ryland exclaimed, "Good!" and rubbed his hands together. He went on, "The Royal Mining Company's property is twenty miles north of here. It's known as a *borrasco*. My scheme is to turn it into a bonanza, then, by spreading the news, we'll start a gold rush. With the gold fever at highest pitch, we'll unload the stock."

RYLAND went and opened his safe, returned, and lay some ore specimens—gold-veined quartz on his desk. "I came by these high-grade samples a long time ago," he explained. "Where and how doesn't matter. We'll fix it so the whole world figures they came from the hills around the Royal mine. A slick scheme, eh, Larragin?"

Half in contempt, half in admiration, Dan said, "George, I've put over some shady deals in my time. I've sold worthless stock and salted mines for no-good companies, but compared to you I'm a piker."

Ryland's face hardened. "You won't go in with me?"

Dan was slow in answering. All his life he'd hoped to make such a killing as this might be, but somehow he wasn't eager now. Yet he was tempted, and finally said, "If I get an offer for that stock, I'll sell."

"Good," said Ryland. "Let's shake on it."

So Dan stayed on at Shamrock. Two days later, a Sunday, George Ryland saddled a horse and rode toward Ward's Landing. To check some

goods that had come upriver for his store, Ryland explained at the Nugget Saloon. He left early in the morning, got back just before dark.

Later in the evening, he told Dan, "It's started."

Two days later a shifty-eyed hardcase named Luke Payson showed up in Shamrock. He came in from the north hills, leading a burro under pack, and dropped a hint, while quenching his thirst in the Nugget, that he'd had some luck prospecting. Hank Burton and a couple of other miners were in the saloon at the time, and they were quickly interested.

Dan sat alone at his favorite spot, the corner table, and watched Burton and the others ply Payson with whisky. In an hour Payson seemed a little drunk. He became talkative, saying he'd been prospecting around Granite Mound where the Royal Mine was located. Finally he brought some ore samples from his pockets.

"You boys ever see anything like this?" he asked.

Hank Burton examined the specimens, whistled his astonishment. The other men of Shamrock were equally impressed, and even the bartender showed mild excitement.

Burton called, "Hey, Larrigan, come take a look."

Dan rose and crossed to the bar, and knew at once that he had seen those chunks of gold-flecked and-veined quartz in George Ryland's office. And he knew at once that Luke Payson was Ryland's man. But Dan didn't know why there was reluctance in him when he said, "Looks good to me."

Payson grabbed up the ore, shoved it into his pockets. "Ain't telling everybody about my strike," he said in that whisky-thick voice he was perhaps feigning. "Not until I file my claim, anyway."

"You sure that ore came from Granite Mound?" Burton asked.

"Sure of it," Payson muttered. "Wouldn't lie to a man who bought me drinks. Well, I'm heading out. Going to Ward's Landing to file my claim."

He staggered out to his burro. Hank Burton was thoughtful for a time, then said, "It's worth a try. I'm making a trip to Granite Mound."

The other two miners said, "We'll go with you."

That was the start of it, and Dan Larrigan somehow didn't like it. His conscience bothered him.

Within an hour all Shamrock knew about Payson's strike. When Hank Burton headed north, a dozen men went with him. Before nightfall a hundred men had abandoned their claims along the Rocker, and many more were planning to leave the next day.

The next day the new gold rush was really on. Men came through Shamrock from Ward's Landing, some traveling alone, some in pairs, some in large groups. They came afoot, by horse, in wagons. Many stopped at George Ryland's store to buy supplies and gear. Luke Payson was doing a fine job of spreading the word.

THE following day more boomers came through Shamrock, some from Ward's Landing and others from father away. All were in the same wild hurry to get to Granite Mound and stake out claims. Dan, listening to the talk of the ones who stopped to outfit at Ryland's store, gathered that the news of Payson's strike had spread far and wide.

There would be hundreds, maybe thousands, of men coming upriver by boat within a very short time. The claims along Rocker Creek were now deserted. Except for Ryland's store and the Nugget Saloon, which also was making money off the boomers traveling through to Granite Mound, Shamrock was almost a ghost town.

George Ryland wore a broad smile these days, for he was doing more

business in a day than he'd done in a month before the rush. He had freight wagons bringing in loads of merchandise from Ward's Landing. Evenings at the Nugget, Ryland would say smugly, "It's going even better than I expected, Dan."

"Maybe so. But somehow I don't like it," Dan once told him.

"What's there to worry about?" Ryland replied. "The bubble will burst, but nobody'll know we started it. We won't have to pay the piper." He laughed a little. "We'll be the ones to be paid off.

"I wasn't worrying, George."

"What, then?"

"You're hoodwinking a lot of people."

"You turning soft, Larrigan?"

"Maybe."

Ryland's face turned hard. "Don't," he said, and his voice was ugly. "Don't think you can renege on this deal. That's a warning, Larrigan!"

Dan knew he was turning soft; he no longer had any heart for such a tinhorn game. The change in him was Kathie Hanlon's doings, for the things she had said had stayed in his mind. It was strange, too. Kathie had told him he should be more like George Ryland, and it now looked as though Ryland was the bigger tinhorn of the two. Dan wondered how the girl would take it, should she find out what Ryland was up to. *She'll blame me,* he thought bitterly. *She'll think I got him into it.* But there was no reason why Kathie should find out that the gold rush was a trumped-up scheme.

It continued. By the end of the week nearly a thousand boomers had passed through Shamrock. They were coming now from downriver, on every steamboat. Some officials of the Royal Mining Company came through on their way to the company's property at Granite Mound. George Ryland was jubilant. He figured that the arrival of such men put an official stamp of approval on the stampede.

Ryland was now ready to act. He made a trip to Ward's Landing and spread word that he had a large block of Royal Mining stock for sale. He waved away Dan's suggestion that the mining company's men would know the rush was a fraud. He figured that it would take time for them to make the discovery.

"In the meantime," he said, "we'll unload our stock."

He was guessing right. Two days later Miles Shannon arrived in Shamrock. He'd hired a livery rig and driver to bring him out from Ward's Landing as soon as he stepped off the boat. Wherever gold or silver was found, Miles Shannon popped up. Fabulous figure in mining circles, shrewd banker, Shannon was a gaunt-framed and gray-faced man of nearly seventy. Clad in rusty black, he looked like a half-starved circuit-riding parson. He stopped at Shamrock because he had heard at the Landing that George Ryland had offered Royal Mining stock for sale.

RYLAND brought him to the Nugget Saloon, introduced Dan, and the three of them went into a back room. They had a round of drinks. Miles Shannon refused Ryland's offer of a cheroot. The old man said peevishly:

"Let's get down to business. You sure you own Royal Mining stock?"

"Larrigan here does," Ryland told him. "A thousand shares."

"How'd he get hold of it?"

"It was signed over to him by Matt Keefer."

"That old son?" said Shannon, risking a thin smile. "I know him." He sobered again. "I don't know how much gold is at Granite Mound, but I know Chris Waters of Royal is up there, no doubt getting ready to put his mine back into production. Walters is a good mining man, but unlucky. Maybe this time his luck's

changed. If so, I want to be in on the game. How much for your stock, Larrigan?"

Dan shrugged.

Ryland said, "A hundred dollars a share, Mr. Shannon. Just what old Matt Keefer paid for it."

Shannon looked as though he would choke. He swore and said, "I'll pay you half that—not a cent more. Take it or leave it."

"We'll leave it Mr. Shannon," George Ryland said, and walked out of the room.

Dan followed him. When they reached the street, Ryland said, "He'll make us another offer. We'll just sit tight and wait."

Dan wasn't so sure of that at the moment, but later he noticed that Miles Shannon was staying on at the Nugget Saloon. The old man was still there in the evening.

When evening came Dan was whiling away the time with a cheroot outside the saloon.He saw Kathie come hurrying toward the center of the town, and he guessed that she was on her way to Ryland's store to buy something. But she called, "Dan, please come!" in a frightened voice. Dan flung away his smoke and ran to meet her.

Kathie caught hold of his arm, cried, "Danny's sick—awful sick!"

Dan shared her alarm, and he hurried to the Hanlon place with her. He grew more alarmed when he entered Kathie's bedroom and bent over the crib. Even though the lamp was turned low, Dan could see the fiery redness of the baby's face. Dan lay a finger to its forehead. The baby was burning up with fever. Danny slept, but it did not seem like a normal sleep. Dan turned to Kathie.

"What'll we do?"

"I don't know, Dan. There's so little I know about babies."

"Where's your father?"

"He went north, at the beginning of the rush."

"Is there a doctor at Ward's Landing, Kathie?"

Kathie said she didn't know. She almost wailed it. "Go see, Dan—please!" she urged. "If there's no doctor, maybe you can find some older woman who'll know what's wrong—and what there is to do!"

Dan said, "I'll get a horse. It won't take long to get there and back."

He strode from the room, and Kathie followed him to the door. As Dan stepped from the house, he saw George Ryland hurrying toward him. Ryland said, "Dammit, Larrigan; why'd you leave the Nugget? Miles Shannon made me another offer—seventy-five dollars a share—and we'd better take it. Come along and sign that certificate over to him before he changes his mind."

"I've got no time for that," Dan said. "Danny's sick—mighty sick."

He started past Ryland, but the man grabbed him and jerked him about. Ryland's face was dark with suspicion. "So you're backing down!" he raged. "Maybe you figure on dealing with Shannon on your own, so you can beat me out of my share of the loot!"

DAN shoved aside Ryland's restraining hand. Suddenly he knew that he wasn't going through with the swindle. He had no reason for such an abrupt decision, unless it was the sight of George Ryland half crazy with greed. But his mind was at last made up. Dan was at last sure.

"The deal's off, George—all off," he said flatly. "I'm not taking Shannon's money. And I'm plenty sorry for stringing along with you, for letting you send all those boomers into the hills on a wild-goose chase."

He started to turn away, but Kathie's alarm cry, "Dan—Dan, be careful!" brought him back. Ryland had pulled a derringer pistol from his pocket. He was swinging it up, bringing it to bear.

Ryland said wildly, "You're going through with it, damn you! I'm not

letting you cheat me out of a fortune! We're going to Shannon!"

Dan started moving, straight at the man. He dropped low, throwing himself at Ryland's legs. The derringer roared, and Dan felt the burning sting of powder against the back of his neck. Then he and Ryland went over together—and Dan had to fight savagely for his life.

Ryland beat at him with that empty single-shot pocket gun, rained blows at his face and head. Dan's brain began to reel from the pain, but he got his hands around the man's throat. He squeezed; his hands closed like jaws of a vise. They rolled over and over, Ryland still hammering at him, until finally Dan felt the man grow limp. He saw that Ryland was dying under his throttling grip, but he didn't let up until Kathie pulled at him and cried, "Dan—Dan, don't!"

He let loose then and rose, leaving Ryland unconscious. He looked at Kathie, saw her horrified face. He turned and broke into a staggering run toward midtown, to get a horse that would take him to Ward's Landing. His face was bloody. His head was battered. But deep inside, he felt all right. He had killed a man tonight. Not George Ryland, for he still lived. He had killed the Old Dan Larrigan—the tinhorn Dan Larrigan. Somehow, Dan understood that. . . .

It was two days before the crisis was over, before the medicine left by the doctor Dan had brought from Ward's Landing helped the infant Danny. By then the fever was gone, and the baby was no longer in that strange sleep the medico had called a coma. Danny cried again, cooed again; he took nourishment, milk Kathie painstaking fed him, and then fell into a normal sleep. But it had been a long vigil. Dan and Kathie had spent two nights without any sleep.

When a knock sounded on the door, and gaunt old Miles Shannon walked in, Dan was too tired to bother with him. But Shannon wasn't to be put off. He said, in his peevish way, "Eighty dollars a share for your stock, Larrigan. That's my final offer."

"Shannon, that stock is worthless."

"Worthless, my eye! I've just come back from Granite Mound," Shannon muttered. "They've found the mother lode—on Royal Mining Company property. Stop stalling, Larrigan. That's my last offer."

It was Kathie, who knew about the swindle, saying, "He'll take it. The stock is yours, Mr. Shannon."

Dan was too astonished to answer. He couldn't believe it.

But after he'd signed the stock certificate over to Miles Shannon and held a bank draft for eighty thousand dollars, he had to believe it.

Dan said, "I'll bank a third of it in Danny's name, Kathie, and another third in old Matt Keefer's name. That's only fair—honest."

"And a third for yourself, Dan?"

"A third for George Ryland," he said. "Maybe it's crazy. Maybe a tinhorn like him doesn't rate it. But after all he started that fake gold rush that turned into a bonanza. A third isn't what he wanted, but he'll jump at it." He smiled wryly. "It'll be my wedding present to you and him, Kathie."

"No, Dan—no!"

"Why not?"

"Give him the third of the money," Kathie said huskily. "But it won't be a wedding present, Dan. I told you he'd asked me to marry him but I never said I told him I would. Dan, the baby is yours and mine, too. He's ours together. I want him to love me, and I know he'll be proud of you. Dan, don't you understand?"

Dan was slow in understanding, for Kathie had jolted him. But at last he held out his arms to her, just as young Danny began to whimper, demanding attention again. The hard-luck kid turned bonanza baby had brought Dan Larrigan and Kathie Hanlon together, but he also managed to keep them apart!

Hellion of the Highways

By Nat McKelvey

A true tale of the law's wild race to catch up with a notorious road agent.

He carries six revolvers and several bowie knives and wears a breast-plate of thin boiler-iron around his body.

A SACRAMENTO, California, newspaper, the *Union*, in 1856 thus described the most "wanted" man of that day. Further, the paper reported that this scourge of the open road, this travelers' terror, this enemy of Wells, Fargo, must be immediately caught and hung to the nearest tree.

Inspiration for this pointed demand was Tom Bell, a tall broad-shouldered young man who preferred highway robbery to doctoring, the profession for which he had trained.

Reading the *Union's* blast, Bell pulled with annoyance at his sandy goatee. His electric blue eyes clouded, charged with anger.

"Fools!" He spewed the single word quickly, as though it scorched his lips.

His scornful condemnation covered not only newspaper editors but amounted also to an estimate of six members of his own gang. Only the day before, they had followed Bell's carefully laid plans for sudden riches with somewhat less than the accuracy and results that he expected.

On August 11, 1856, at Camptonville, California, the stagecoach for Marysville prepared to pull out. As John Gear, the driver, mounted the box, he called down to a lone horseman.

"Everything all right, Bill?"

Bill Rideout, a Camptonville gold buyer, answered quickly. "Give me ten minutes' start," he declared. "And things should be safe enough."

Beside Gear on the driver's box, shotgun slung across his knees, lounged Jed Dobson, messenger for the Langton Express Company. As John Gear gathered the reins and the muscles in the hindquarters of his six horses bunched for a running start, Dobson shouted to the horse-holder.

"Let 'em go!"

When the Camptonville stage rocketed away, Bill Rideout had been ten minutes down the dusty road. "We'll bring it through," he mused, "Tom Bell or not."

The "it" to which Rideout referred was a brass-bound box containing $100,000 in gold.

At Dry Creek, a half-hour out of Marysville, the stage route branched, the shady fork, somewhat longer, following the high bank of the stream. Rideout reached this junction at four-thirty in the afternoon. He had seen no one, heard nothing. The closeness of his destination and the warmth of the day soothed his caution.

"Guess I'll take the long road," he muttered. "Much cooler. Stage'll be all right now."

He nudged his bronc down the shady trail, walking him easily. The day's ride had proved tiring, and Rideout let his head fall gently to his chest, the easy motion of the horse's measured step lulling him to drowsiness. The voice that awakened him was like a rude hand slapping his cheek.

"Pull up!" commanded the voice. "Pull up if ye don't want to get hurt!"

Rideout snapped alert, finding himself staring into the gaping bores of three heavy pistols. Behind the pistols were hard, hairy hands, belonging to three masked men on horseback.

Hollowly, the leader snapped an order.

"Tie this hombre," he rasped, "and hurry. We gotta meet the boys."

Gagged and bound, his horse set free, Rideout saw the three men jog away, cutting across Dry Creek toward the low road, the one on which, even now, he could hear the grinding of stage wheels.

SCARCELY two minutes after his captors left him, Rideout heard shooting. He thought he recognized the voice of the shotgun messenger, Jed Dobson, screaming, "No, ye don't," between hollow blasts of his twin-barreled scattergun. Pistol and rifle fire crackled intermittently.

Struggling, Rideout discovered that, in their haste, his ambushers had failed to secure him stoutly. He wriggled free, regained his horse, and reached the scene of battle in time to see the stage reeling away, Dobson still firing.

Rideout did not stop to examine two bandits who had fallen in the fight. But a casual glance showed him that one was a Mexican, probably Fernandez, Bell's knife expert. Putting spurs to his horse, Rideout reached Marysville ahead of the stage, spreading the alarm.

When Gear brought his battered Concord to a screeching halt at the Marysville stage station, half the town had gathered.

"Didn't get the gold, did they, John?" asked the agent, his voice taut with anxiety.

"Nope," Gear affirmed. "But they got me—in the arm. Better look to the passengers."

Inside the coach, John Campbell, a traveler, had a wound in the forehead. Another passenger had lead through both legs. Worst of all, Mrs. Mary Tilghman, wife of a Marysville barber, lay dead, a bullet in her head. Five other passengers, one white man and four Chinese, were no longer on the stage. They had ingloriously abandoned it in the thick of shooting.

"Tom Bell done it." That was Dobson's claim and Gear backed him up. Throughout the state, newspapers screamed for action, threatening great changes in the ranks of public servants if action against Bell did not produce results.

Captain William King of the Marysville police, aided by detectives Robert Harrison and Daniel Gay, from Sacramento, took up the chase.

From the robber leader, Captain King received a cocky letter. "Catch me if you can!" it taunted.

Perhaps Tom Bell was counting on confusion regarding his identity, a confusion that he had carefully created.

Born in Rome, Tennessee, Tom Bell's true name was Dr. Thomas J. Hodges. During the Mexican war, he served with the Tennessee Volunteers as a medical attaché. In 1855, as a young man of thirty, he arrived in California. Restless and quick to fight, he soon landed in Angel Island prison, charged with some unrecorded crime.

While in jail, Hodges met a hard customer named Bill Gristy. Together, these men plotted escape. Now the young doctor assumed the name, "Tom Bell," borrowing it from a petty thief then active around California gold camps. Through his knowledge of medicine, Hodges, alias Bell, managed to produce plausible symptoms of serious illness. Prison authorities granted him "extended liberties." He had the freedom of the prison courtyard.

Shortly, with the aid of Gristy, Bell extended these liberties to exclude prison life altogether. Free from the dark island in San Francisco bay, Bell and Gristy recruited a gang. To it came Ned Connor and Jim Smith, former convicts; Monte Jack Lyon, a specialist at horse theft; Juan Fernandez, handy with a knife, and "English" Bob Carr.

BELL'S gang stole stock, raided saloons and mining camp commissaries, held up travelers. Occasionally, some victim caught a memorable glimpse of the robber king, enough, at least, to describe him.

He was tall and wiry. His sandy whiskers, mustache and goatee were neatly trimmed. His thick blond hair hung at shoulder length. His blue eyes squinted from under well-proportioned sandy brows. He might have been handsome,

travelers said. But a kick in the face by an irate mule had ruined that possibility. It had left Bell with a nose so badly smashed as to give him the hideous leer of a devil.

Strange legends grew around this ugly will-o'-the-wisp. Once, in a holdup, his men shot one of the victims. Bell, in his rôle of surgeon, cleansed and bound up the injured man's wounds. Then, stopping a teamster who chanced by, the bandit chief forced him to haul the wounded man to his destination. But the teamster could not leave until he forked over the doctor's customary medical fee, five dollars!

On the stage road between Sacramento and Nevada City, a Bell accomplice, red-haired Elizabeth Hood, operated the Western Exchange Hotel. Bell's men, producing an identifying talisman—a bullet on a string—were welcome here. To them Mrs. Hood gave information concerning wealthy travelers who had been or were her guests.

After the Camptonville-Marysville stage stickup, Bell moved Elizabeth Hood, with her three daughters, to a small ranch about six miles from Firebaugh's Ferry in the Tulare Lakes region of California.

Meantime, the search for the broken-nosed bandit moved on apace. Harrison, the detective from Sacramento, and J. M. Anderson, a Marysville policeman, caught Tom Brown, a minor gang member. Through information Brown gave, Harrison and his men ambushed five of the gang in a tent near Folsom. In the skirmish, one bandit fell dead, bullet ventilated. Three others were captured.

Singly, and in small lots, lawmen began to corner and seize Bell's men. Jack Phillips, an Australian who harbored Bell's men at his inn, the Mountaineer House, dropped into the net. Near Auburn, Bell himself barely escaped killing in a shoot-out with Sheriff Henson of Placer County. His right-hand man, Ned Connor, died in this fracas along with a gent known only as "Texas."

Bell moved to Table Mountain, an area far south of his usual haunts. While en route to meet Bell at this new hideout, Bill Gristy and a Mexican highwayman stopped for lunch at Knight's Ferry. An alert innkeeper, seeing them stowing away his grub, could scarcely hold back a grunt of surprised alarm.

His breath sucked in sharply. "Them's Bell's men." Casually, his heart pounding at the effort to be calm, the inn man slipped out of his apron. Lighting a cigar, he stalked through the door into the bright sunshine. Gristy remarked his going with some apprehension but shrugged it off.

Minutes later he devoutly wished that he had heeded his premonition. Handcuffed to his Mexican companion and to a sheriff's deputy, Gristy had ample time to ponder the ways of fate. Jailed, the tough Gristy, under relentless questioning, revealed Bell's ranch hideout near Firebaugh's Ferry.

GUIDED by the Mexican, a posse from Knight's Ferry, headed by Judge Belt, arriving at the ranch on Monday, September 29, 1856. The place hunkered against the brown earth; it was completely deserted.

After a week of futile watching, Belt pulled his men out, heading them back to town. Last to leave was Robert Price, a rancher from Sonora.

As Price took trail, he noticed, in a willow thicket, a lone man, mounted on a beautiful buckskin horse. By his furtive actions, this man obviously wished to avoid observation.

Price spurred up his bronc. "Gotta catch Judge Belt," he declared. "Didn't like that feller's manner."

"It might be Bell," Bob Price explained, when he had overtaken the posse. "Couldn't get real close, of course. But he shore acted like he was a mite interested in what was a-goin' on at the ranch."

Judge Belt scattered his men around the hill on which the lone rider sat. With Price and another assistant, the judge then rode back to the spot. The man on the horse still sat there, shading his eyes with his hand, watching the ranch below.

Judge Belt and his two men, pistols

drawn, rode straight up to the stranger on the buckskin bronc. Seeing them closing in, he seemed not to start but had, rather, the appearance of a tired and beaten man.

Completely covered with grime, his beard unkempt, his hair matted, his clothes tattered, he might have been anyone—a hunter, a rancher, a weary miner. But that long-ago mule had done his work well. Tom Bell could not hide his hideous nose.

Admitting his identity, Bell surrendered without a fight. He knew, as he surveyed the tall surrounding sycamores, what his fate would be. He read it in the eyes of the posse, in the electric intensity that engulfs men who are about to kill.

"May I write two letters?" he questioned.

Given pencil and paper, Bell slowly headed a sheet October 4, 1956. His first letter, to his red-haired Elizabeth Hood, complained:

> I am accused of every robbery that has been committed for the past twelve months, which is entirely false. I have never committed but three highway robberies in my life; but still I am to blame and my fate is sealed. I am to die like a dog. . . .

To his mother Bell wrote:

> Give my respects to all my old and youthful friends. Tell them to beware of bad associations, and never to enter into any gambling saloons, for that has been my ruin.

At four in the afternoon, Tom Bell, aided by a rope, a posse and a sycamore tree, fulfilled his destiny.

On the Merced River, a month later, occurred a tragic aftermath. Five men, who had not learned of Bell's execution, prepared to storm a cabin in which they believed he was hiding. As they neared the building, they split into two groups. A deputy sheriff and his party, finding tethered horses, decided to wait there, prepared to cut off the bandits' escape.

In the black night, the sheriff, hearing a rustle in the nearby thicket, called out: "Who's there. Move and I'll shoot!"

For answer the lawman and his aides received a hail of buckshot. For the sheriff the shot proved fatal. His wounded companions, horror-stricken, greeted the other half of the searching party as they came from the bushes, returning from finding an empty cabin.

Even in death, Tom Bell, hellion of the highways, had reached out with bullets to write "finish" to his stormy career.

Saddle Snake Venom

By Gunnison Steele

He was just an old cow-country sheriff, but he still savvied how to fork a bronc, round up a renegade—and line his sixes.

SHERIFF SAM PARDEE stopped his horse when he spotted the red glow of a fire off in the chaparral to his right. A rawboned, craggy-faced man crowding sixty, he sat slack in the saddle and thoughtfully regarded this sign of a dry camp.

He was weary after a hard and fruitless day of looking for the men who had robbed and killed old "Chilkot" Boone at his cabin up at Blue Springs. Trailing in the badlands was difficult, and the killers had proved themselves cunning. Likely, Sam Pardee considered, this was the campfire of some prospector or drifter. But he wasn't overlooking any bets. He nudged his tired dun toward the fire.

Two men were in the crimson circle of light. One of them was gaunt, dark-faced; the other burly, powerful, with hawkish features and off-color eyes. They had been squatting beside the fire, over which simmered a pot of coffee. But now, as Sam Pardee rode into the firelight, they got quickly to their feet, a certain wariness in their eyes, as was natural at sight of a stranger.

Not owlhooters, the sheriff decided instantly, or they would have faded back into the brush at his approach. Two horses were picketed near by. Packs and a couple of canteens lay on the ground.

The tall old sheriff nodded amiably, said, "Howdy, gents. I'm Sheriff Pardee from Sentinel. Saw your fire and decided to have a look-see."

The two nodded, and their hands moved away from the butts of the guns they wore.

"Light down, sheriff," the burly man invited. "I'm Ben Cralle and this hombre is 'Hawk' Rhett. We're horse buyers. We heard your horse out in the chaparral several minutes ago."

THE sheriff swung to the ground. He had never seen these two before, and he had spent most of a lifetime in Thunder Valley. But perhaps they were just riding in. Rhett and Cralle sat back down, their boots outthrust to the fire. Cralle gestured toward the coffeepot.

"Plenty of coffee, and I'll throw together some grub if you're hungry," he said.

"I'll wait till I get to town," Pardee declined. "But I could use a drink of water if you've got any. My can's empty."

"Help yourself," Cralle said, handing the sheriff one of the canteens.

Sam Pardee drank deeply. Except in the timbered eastern section there

were no more than a dozen waterholes in all of Thunder Valley. Trailing sometimes got pretty dry.

"Some kind of trouble?" Rhett asked curiously.

"A killin', sometime this mornin'," Pardee nodded. "Old Chilkot Boone, up in the northern end of the basin. Lived there alone in his cabin and raised a few cattle. He was a queer old coot, and it was generally thought that he kept what money he had cached somewhere about his place. And seems like he did."

Rhett clucked sympathetically. "That's a bad practice."

"So it seems. Anyway, about noon Chilkot was found dead in his shack. He'd been treated pretty rough before he died, likely to make him tell where his money cache was. And I reckon he told, for a plank had been ripped out of the wall and there was an empty soda can which likely had held the money."

"Too bad," said the dark-faced Cralle. "You don't have any idea who done it?"

The sheriff squinted thoughtfully. "They were pretty foxy. There's a waterhole behind Chilkot's cabin—Blue Springs it's called, because the clay about the hole is a bluish color—and the killers had left some boot and hoof prints in the mud. But that was all. They headed into the badlands, and there wasn't a chance to trail 'em. I've been out all day, along with a dozen of the other boys, but—" Sam Pardee shrugged wearily.

"I hope you catch the skunks," Cralle declared. "Hawk and me are strangers here. We figured we could pick up some cheap horses."

"Maybe you can. Strangers and horse buyers, huh?"

"That's right."

"Which way'd you come in?"

"From the south. We followed the stage road through Blizzard Pass. Aimed to make Sentinel by dark, but decided we'd better camp."

"Didn't see any suspicious-lookin' riders, I reckon?"

"Nope—only a gang of punchers and an ol' coot with a burro. You reckon them killers are headed this way?"

"Might be. Can't ever tell about skunky killers." Pardee turned toward his horse. "Well, I'll be ridin' on."

Cralle said, "If we can help you, sheriff, just let us know."

"You can help me—" Sam Pardee suddenly whirled back to the fire, hand on the butt of his long-barreled old six-shooter— "by comin' to jail peaceable, you murderin' snakes!"

SHOCKED surprise slapped at the faces of the two squatting beside the fire. Their bodies tensed and their eyes were suddenly cold and wary.

"What you mean, old man?" Rhett demanded.

"I mean it was you two that tortured and killed and robbed old Chilkot Boone!"

"You're loco! Didn't you hear us say we come in from the south—"

"And that's the lie that brands you!" Sam Pardee spat. "You've been in the north end of the valley, at Chilkot's cabin, not many hours ago."

"What makes you think that?"

"I *know* it! Boot prints showed where the two killers had drunk and filled their canteens at the spring behind Chilkot's cabin. You remember me sayin' that the ground about that waterhole was a bluish clay? It's the only clay that color in the whole valley. Look on the soles of your boots!"

Instinctively, the eyes of Cralle and Rhett jerked to their boots. At the same instant, they both grabbed for their guns. Rhett leaped upward and backward. Cralle rolled, spitting like a huge tomcat, and flame from his gun lashed upward.

But, with amazing quickness, Sam Pardee had drawn. Fire and lead bawled from the muzzle of his gun. Rhett's boot heels hammered the hard earth as he fought to stand under the bullet that slammed into his chest, but

he failed, and slammed backward to the ground.

The bullet from Cralle's gun had brushed Pardee's throat. He leaped agilely aside, triggering his own gun again. Cralle howled with pain. He threw away his gun, clawing at his side and swayed to his knees.

"I give up," he moaned. "Don't kill me!"

Sam Pardee took his gun, said calmly, "Just means I got to go to the trouble of hangin' you. You deny you two killed old Chilkot?"

"What'd be the use now?" Cralle asked bitterly. "If we'd had sense enough to wash that blue clay off our boots—"

"Wasn't any clay on your boots," the old sheriff said grimly. "Leastwise, I didn't see any. That was just a bluff. But it stood to reason that if you'd been to Chilkot's place and lied about it, then you'd killed Chilkot, too. And I knew you'd lied."

"But if there wasn't any of that clay on our boots, how did you know it?"

"I've lived my life in this valley," Sam Pardee said slowly. "I know where every gully is, every rock and cactus, and I've drunk from every waterhole a hundred times. Some of the water is good and sweet, some not, but the water in each hole has a different taste for a man who's spent his life drinkin' it."

He pointed to the canteen he'd drunk from a moment before.

"I knew, the minute my tongue tasted the water in that can, that it had come from Blue Springs!"

Badman Steals the Big Show

By J. Edward Leithead

(Continued from page 20)

the wild ones on Polk's range. But those guards who escaped from his main camp saw me in the posse, and when they told Shel, he knew his other plan had misfired."

"I sure didn't know what I was letting myself in for when I hired that man," fumed Lipscomb.

"Shel's through troublin' anybody," Wycherly said and looked around, at a sharp exclamation in Elaine's voice. She was standing a few feet from him. He stepped toward her. "What did that mean, Elaine? That you still—"

"No, no!" the girl interrupted and moved into the curve of Vince's arm. "I haven't a shred of feeling left for Shel Tustin. I'm glad he didn't get you, Vince!"

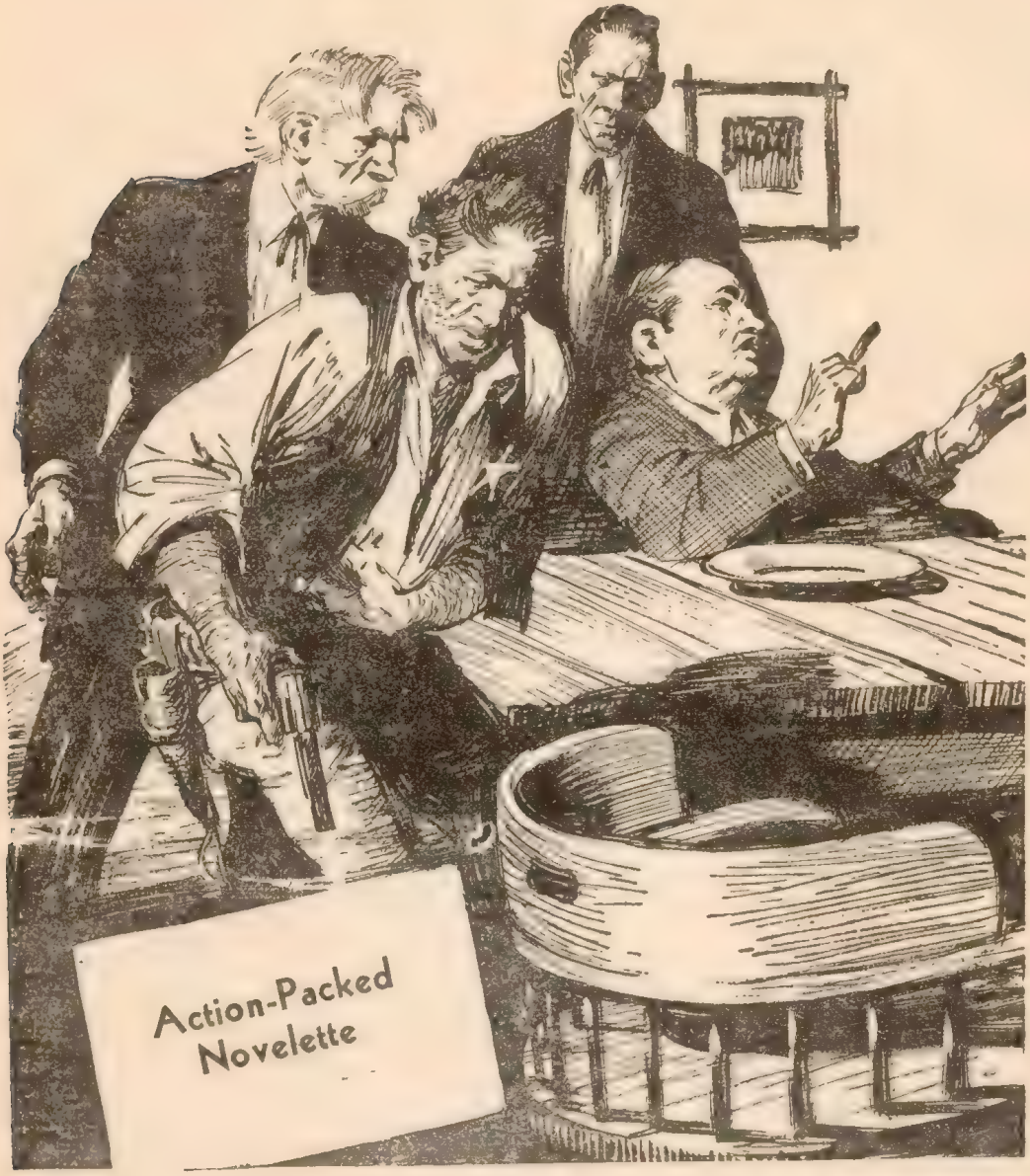
Wycherly looked down at her. "So that's what you meant!"

Bronco Buckner stamped through the snow. "Danged if you ain't a pair to draw the crowds! Buckner's Rodeo Shows will be bigger and better than ever next season. "I'll bill you as the *Saddle King* and the *Lariat Queen.*" But he sounded a trifle worried. "You two ain't goin' to marry and settle down, are you?"

The mustanger chuckled, his eyes on the girl. "How about billin' us as Vince and Elaine Wycherly, a husband-and-wife act? I figure it'll be that way, Buckner."

"Anything you say—" the old showman beamed—"just so you don't quit the outfit."

The Devil Walks in



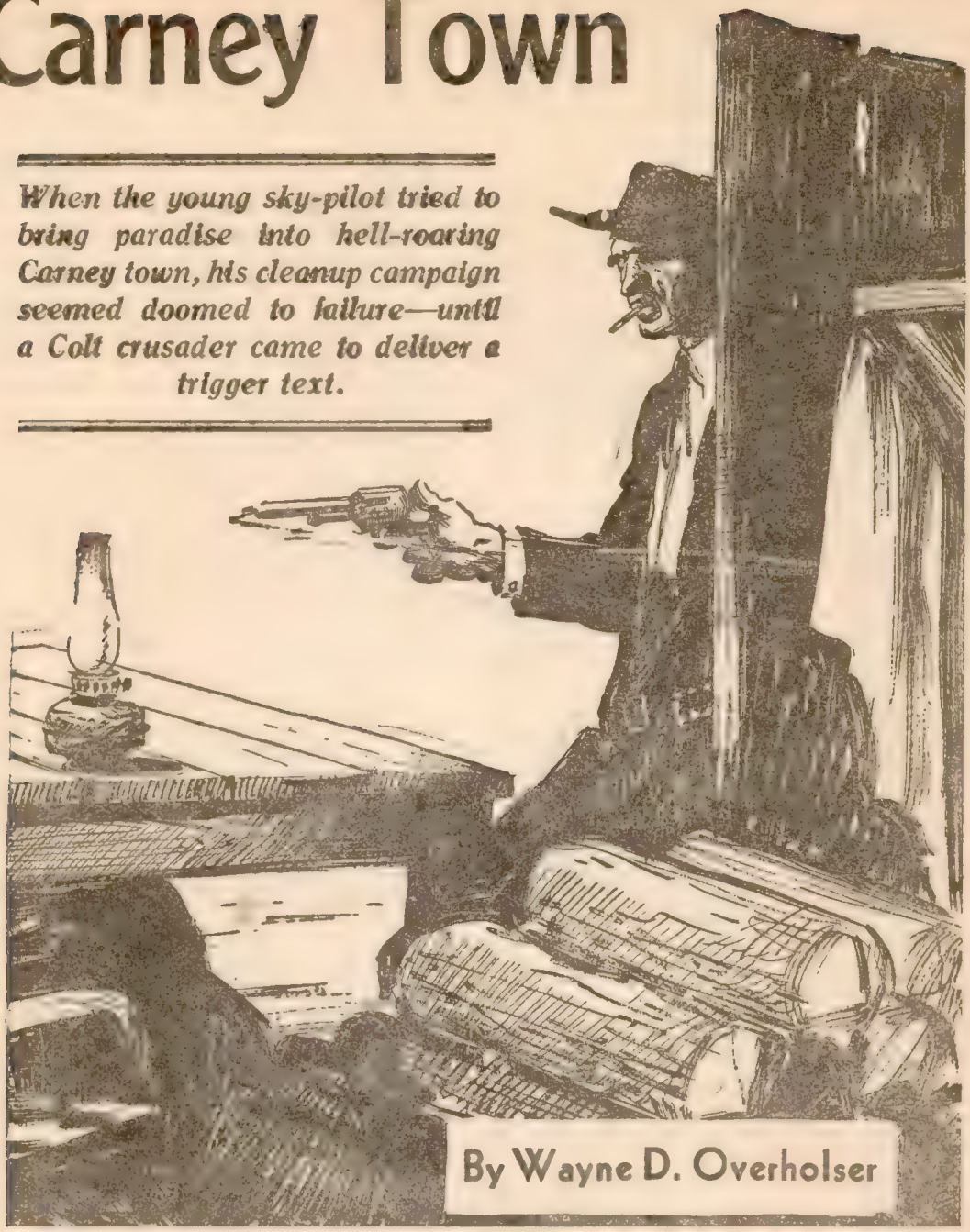
CHAPTER I

IN DURANGO, it was said that Carney was the wickedest camp in the San Juans, and it might have been true, for Carney was wicked enough. Preacher Mark Ingles, who had been in town less than three months, expected to find sin here. He had not expected to find the selfishness and utter contempt for human life that was so characteristic of the place. Because Mark Ingles was the forthright kind of man that he was, he stated his indictment before his congregation one Sunday in October.

Albert Holman was in the front row, his daughter Ann beside him. Holman owned the Red Boy mine as well as much of the town, and Ingles

Carney Town

When the young sky-pilot tried to bring paradise into hell-roaring Carney town, his cleanup campaign seemed doomed to failure—until a Colt crusader came to deliver a trigger text.



By Wayne D. Overholser

had been told that Holman had financed the building of the Gay Lady, Solo James's gambling hall in Hell's Acre. The banker, John Menefee, was there with his family. Even the marshal, Rednose Smith, was in the back pew. This, Ingles thought gravely, was the day to speak his mind.

Ingles read the Scripture, his clear voice carrying to the far corners of the room. He preached his prepared sermon, his eyes now and then brushing Ann Holman's, and regret touched him, for he knew the personal cost of this thing he had to do.

At five minutes to twelve he was ready. He paused, gray eyes sweeping the room. There were ninety-odd people here, the elite of town, the social and financial dictators, the folks who

could do the jobs that needed doing. No one, except Rednose Smith himself, was here from Hell's Acre.

Ingles waited until he knew he had the attention of everyone. He straightened, his meaty shoulders making a tight fit in his black coat. Brushing back a stubborn lock of hair from his forehead, he gripped the top of the pulpit, and took the plunge.

"It's a poor kind of religion that does not influence humanity toward a better life," Ingles said bluntly. "I don't need to point out the sin that is in our town. I do need to point out the hypocrisy that is in our midst, and to make a call for action."

INGLES saw puzzlement on Ann Holman's pretty face, anger on her father's. Rednose Smith's lips began to move as he muttered to himself. Menefee was craning his neck to see Holman.

"We have thousands of people jammed together in this camp," Ingles hurried on, "but we have no hospital. We have no legal town government. We have no school, no water system, no jail. We have no ordinances empowering our marshal to enforce an order from the fire department or the doctor. Why don't we do something?"

Mark Ingles was stating facts that every person before him knew were true, but true or not, they didn't want to hear them. They glared at him, all but Ann Holman whose eyes mirrored the admiration she felt for him.

"There's one reason which we all know. The things which we need take taxes. Taxes mean money out of the pockets of our citizens. But on the other hand we can afford Hell's Acre where enough money goes over the bar or gambling tables every night to build an adequate school or jail or water system. Because there could be no better place than this to start a program to solve our problems, I am calling a meeting in my home Wednesday night to see that action is taken."

He had said enough. When the service was over and he stood outside the door shaking hands, he wondered if he had said too much. Nobody smiled. Not one said he liked the sermon. They shook hands and hurried away. But Holman, Menefee, and Rednose Smith had not gone, and when Ingles turned back into the building, he found them waiting for him.

"Now look here, Parson," Smith exploded in his belligerent manner. "This camp is being run all right. You'd better keep your nose home where it belongs."

"Just a minute, marshal." Holman was smiling genially. "Mr. Ingles, I think that like many young and ambitious ministers, you have been misguided. I would like to point out that inside of ten years, this camp will be a ghost town. Meanwhile, we will make out as best we can." He cleared his throat. "You will not have the meeting you mentioned. It is better not to stir these things up."

Albert Holman had the appearance of a fat-cheeked cherub with a pickle-keg belly. Now he was patting down the few hairs that remained on his shiny head, smiling and nodding as if he were instructing a child. It was a mask, and behind it Holman's temper was boiling. Ingles knew him well enough to recognize the signs.

"That ten years is important to all of us," Ingles said gravely. "It would be to you if you had typhoid fever. Or to Mr. Menefee's children. We can't just take ten years of our lives, Mr. Holman, and say we will spend nothing during that period for our health, protection, or education."

"We will do nothing." The smile was gone from Holman's lips. "If you value your job, Ingles, you'll forget this whole crazy business."

"I do not value my job that much," Ingles said quietly. "When a man puts his hand to the plow, he cannot look back."

"We're beating around the bush," Menefee said bluntly. "You hit the nail on the head when you said these things take taxes. A few of us would

pay them. The bulk of the people in this camp wouldn't pay a nickel. We won't do it, Ingles."

"I think you will," Ingles murmured. "Before this is over, Solo James will be paying taxes. It's possible we may even curb some of his present activities."

"Solo's doing all right." Rednose Smith's stubble-covered jaw slid forward. "You stay on your side of the street, Preacher. Savvy?"

"I have no side of the street, marshal."

"You're going ahead with this?" Holman demanded.

"Yes."

"Then there are two things I might as well make clear now," Holman said ominously. "You are no longer minister of this church, and we'll be at your place Wednesday night."

"To help us clean things up?"

"No. To stop you."

THEY tramped out, the three of them, Rednose Smith muttering something under his breath. Ingles walked up the aisle to the front of the church where Ann Holman was waiting for him. She stood up now and gave him a sober look. Ingles, meeting her eyes, wondered if they were purple or blue. He had never been able to decide.

"I heard," Ann said simply.

"Your father sounded a little upset. I guess he didn't mean it."

"He meant it, Mark." Ann turned away and walked to a window. "I'm not proud of my father. I've tried not to believe the talk that he has an agreement with Solo James, but I'm convinced now that it must be true, or Rednose Smith wouldn't wear the marshal's star."

"And Menefee plays whatever tune your father calls," Ingles murmured.

Ingles got his Bible from the pulpit and left the church with Ann. They walked in silence up the twisting path to the Holman house, a towering structure with imposing bay windows. It was built, Ingles thought, to shout imperiously to the scattered shacks and tents that here lived the richest man in Carney.

They stood for a moment in front of the gate, Ann looking at the aspens that marched in long columns up the mountainside, their quivering orange-gold leaves bringing a transient glory to a rugged land.

"I wonder why there must be so much trouble in a world that holds beauty like this," Ann said softly.

"I love you," Ingles said. "Will you marry me? Now?"

She drew away, startled. "Aren't you rather abrupt, Mark?"

"I guess so," he admitted, "but there may not be another opportunity."

"If you had asked me last week," she said slowly, "I could have said yes. I can't now."

"You must have had a wonderful mother."

They had not seen Holman come down the path from the house. His laugh brought them around to face him. "The inference was not lost upon me, Ingles, but it is possible that Ann might have inherited some of her good points from me."

"There is some good in all of us," Ingles admitted.

Holman scratched his pudgy nose, frankly puzzled. "I don't understand you, Ingles. You haven't a chance to pull this reform business off. You're licked before you start. You'll lose your job, and you'll lose Ann. Is there any sense to it?"

"You wouldn't see any sense in it," Ingles said soberly. "A man who can close his eyes to the things that Solo James does and the vice we have constantly before us in Hell's Acre wouldn't understand."

"No, I wouldn't," Holman admitted, "but I do understand you're sticking your finger into my pie. That's not what you came to Carney to do."

"It's part of it."

Holman opened the gate. "Come in, Ann. You're not welcome here now, Ingles. Don't see her again."

CHAPTER II

THERE were two men in Carney who had not been in church that Sunday morning to hear Ingles's declaration of war, but who should be on his side, Doc McCabe and Inky Bellew, who was everything on the Carney *Weekly News* from office boy to printer's devil.

Ingles dropped into McCabe's office early Monday. The medico was a skinny man with drooping eyelids and a yellow skin that made him look as if he were less than a week from his funeral. He had come to the high country for his health, and he had recovered enough of it to prophesy that half the well men in Carney would beat him to the grave.

"Howdy, Parson," McCabe said genially. He sat down on a bottle-littered desk and shoved a chair toward Ingles with his foot. "Hear you kicked up quite a ruckus yesterday morning."

"Who told you?"

"Menefee." McCabe chuckled. "Son, he was mad. I don't mean angry. I mean mad. They're fixing to get you."

"I expected that. Doc, I want you to come to the meeting. I'd sort of counted on you backing me up."

McCabe teetered back and forth on his desk, bony hands clasping a knee. He held his answer for a moment, studying Ingles as if seeing him in a new light. Finally he said, "Inside of you is something they call guts, but you're bucking a pat hand. I'd say you're foolish."

"Perhaps. I'm wanting to know if you'll back me."

"Why, sure." The medico's thin lips stretched thinner when he grinned. "I've got nothing to lose. When folks need me, they holler no matter what I think or say. They don't have to have you."

Ingles rose. "I know," he said soberly. "I'll see you Wednesday night."

Ingles waded through the dust of Main Street that had been churned ankle-deep by innumerable hoofs and wheels, and in rainy weather would become a bog of ooze. It was a new and boisterous town, this Carney, where violence swept unchecked except by the limits of human endurance, unpainted, many of the nail heads still without rust. From farther along the street Ingles heard the sound of hammers and saws. They were hurrying Holman's big hotel to completion.

Ducking between the ore wagons that constantly plied the street and worried the dust into a white haze which was never completely absent from the town, Ingles reached the opposite plank walk and turned into Inky Bellew's print shop.

"Howdy, Parson." Bellew slid off the stool at the composing frame. "I hear you're giving me a news story."

"May be quite a yarn," Ingles said gravely. "I want your help, Inky."

Bellew pulled a scarred pipe from his pocket. He was a middle-aged man who had freighted his printing outfit in from Del Norte the spring before. He had printed a newspaper in a dozen Colorada mining camps, and somewhere back along the years his ambition and the will to fight had been drained from him.

"I won't be any help, Parson," Bellew said roughly. "Don't pull me into your stupid squabbles."

"It isn't stupid," Ingles snapped, "any more than the things which make up life are stupid. I can't do the job by myself, but the decent folks of Carney can if we work together."

"Decent folks." Bellew laughed shortly. "You're like all preachers, trying to see some good in everybody. I suppose you think Solo James has a soul. Or Albert Holman."

"They have souls if you can stir them. That's your job, to do the stirring."

"And what would it get me?" Bellew demanded. "A visit from Rednose Smith or some of Solo's toughs. On top of that, I'd lose most of my advertising." He thumbed the tobacco tight into his pipe bowl and held a match

flame to it. "You started this game, Parson. Play it out."

BELLEW looked at Ingles defiantly and then dropped his gaze when the preacher said, "I thought editors were crusaders for justice and fair play."

"Some are, but they die young, Parson. You don't run into many."

Ingles turned to the door, disappointment washing through him in a bitter stream. "You'll be there Wednesday night, won't you?"

"I'll be there to get the yarn, but count me out on the fighting." Bellew chewed on his pipestem. "Look, Parson. I admire a man who isn't afraid to fight for his convictions, but you're bucking a combination you can't beat. I've seen it tried too many times. You're young and ambitious, and hell, you're foolish."

"It's the way you look at it, isn't it, Inky?" Ingles asked, and went into the street.

Ingles cruised along the plank walk, speaking to people he knew, people who returned his greeting in quick guarded words and hurried on. He was poison. He was to be let alone. He was a preacher without a church, a parish. And, at this moment, he was an utterly lonely man.

Ingles stood for a moment at the end of the business block, hearing the brawling from Hell's Acre that slacked off at this time of day, but never completely died. Hell's Acre was a huddle of buildings scattered along a street that paralleled the business block, centered by Solo James's Gay Lady.

There were half a dozen saloons along Main Street operated by men who refused to pay the tribute demanded by James who was the Czar of Hell's Acre. Their customers were the sober miners who paid for a single drink and stood along the bar and talked. The spenders were drawn by the tinsel and glitter of Hell's Acre in the manner a powerful magnet draws steel. Ingles knew this, and he knew that power and money went hand in hand. Facing a future sharply touched by doubt, he turned toward his house.

Hell's Acre had its laugh over the preacher's meeting, and promptly forgot it. Ingles kept his own counsel and was left strictly alone until Wednesday night when a stranger knocked on his back door a few minutes before eight. When Ingles pulled the door open, the man slid in without waiting for an invitation. He said, "Shut the door," his tone cold and without emotion. When Ingles had obeyed, he asked, "You're Mark Ingles, the preacher?"

Puzzled, Ingles stared at the man. "Yes. Something I can do for you?"

"No, but there's something I can do for you."

"I don't understand."

The stranger let it go for a moment. He stood with his back to the wall, pale blue eyes sweeping Ingles. He was black-haired and wore a sweeping mustache as black as his hair. His freshly shaven skin was bronzed, and the few wrinkles it held, Ingles guessed, came from squinting at the sun rather than age.

The man was somewhere between thirty and forty. His clothes were expensive and entirely black; the guns tied low on his thighs were black-butted and showed much use. He was big, long-nosed, and long-faced, and Mark Ingles could not help feeling the austere quality of the man and noting the satanic set of his features.

"I came in on the stage today because I'd heard about you and I couldn't believe what I'd heard," the stranger said finally.

"I guess there isn't much to hear about me," Ingles said, still puzzled.

"The yarn I got was that you'd put it up to a bunch of the top crust about making Carney a decent town, and you were having a meeting tonight to get something started. That right?"

"That's right. What's hard to believe about it?"

"Preachers I've seen don't go

around kicking up that kind of trouble," the stranger said flatly. "Now that you've kicked the lid off, I'm here to give you a hand."

"I don't think—" Ingles began.

"You won't be thinking about anything, knowing what you know about this business. That's why I'm sitting in on the meeting, but I don't want to be seen right off."

Against his better judgment, Ingles said, "You can stay here in the kitchen. Keep the door open and you'll hear what's said."

THEY started coming the moment the stranger was in the kitchen, Doc McCabe first, then Holman and Menefee, Rednose Smith, and finally Inky Bellew, pulling hard on his pipe and plainly worried. Without direction on Ingles's part, McCabe and Bellew took seats along the kitchen wall, the other three on the opposite side of the room. As far as Ingles could tell, Smith was the only one who was armed.

Brushing back his stubborn lock of hair, Ingles called the meeting to order. He said, "It seems to me that before we can remedy the evils that face us, we'll have to organize a town government. As I understand it, our marshal has no legal authority."

Rednose Smith patted his gun butt, thick lips sliding away from yellow teeth. "I've got all the authority I need right here."

Bellew puffed harder on his pipe. McCabe grinned tolerantly. Holman and Menefee stared coldly at Ingles.

"How about it, Holman?" Ingles prodded.

"We don't need a town government," Holman said. "Everything's fine."

"How about the sanitary conditions, Doc?" Ingles asked.

"They're terrible," Doc McCabe said quickly. "Everyone in this room knows that. Our water comes out of the creek. We store it in barrels, polliwogs and all. With shacks strung for a mile upstream, a typhoid epidemic could sweep the camp overnight." He waggled a bony finger at Holman. "You're riding high and mighty, owning the mine and half the town, but you can get sick and die and go to hell the same as the rest of us. Ever think of that, Al?"

"I've thought of it," Holman growled.

"We haven't the beginning of an adequate system of fire protection. How are you going to get that, if you don't have an organized town government?"

"We won't," Holman snapped. "We'll take a chance."

"Hell's bells." McCabe threw up his hands. "You'll take a chance. All the time you're pulling in money hand over fist, but you'll do your damnedest to keep from spending a nickel that'll do anybody else some good."

Holman's cheeks burned a cherry red, and he began to breathe hard, but it was the banker, Menefee, who got to his feet. "Come on, Al. Let these fools have their meeting. We don't have to listen to this."

"You're not leaving yet." The black-haired stranger strode out of the kitchen. "I had a hunch this was the way it would go, Parson."

"Roush." Rednose Smith was on his feet, the one word a shrill, terror-filled cry. "You're the devil, Roush."

The stranger spun toward Smith just as the marshal's hand started downward for his gun. Smith had a reputation in Carney for being fast on the draw, but compared to the stranger, he was pathetically slow. His Colt barrel was still half in leather when the man he'd called Roush shot him.

Ingles was never sure he'd seen Roush draw, although his eyes were on him at the time. It seemed, and Ingles knew it was an illusion, that the black-butted gun had leaped upward to meet the downsweeping hand. Then it was roaring, and Smith was down, his brain torn half out of his head.

"Either one of you moneybags want

to play your man's hand out?" Roush asked.

HOLMAN and Menefee were on their feet, paralyzed by fear, their eyes fixed on the dead man. McCabe crossed to Smith and made his examination. He rose. "Dead." He nodded at Menefee. "Let's take him over to my office."

As they carried Smith out, Roush reached out and jerked the star from the dead man's shirt.

"I always like to make myself marshal when I play a hand like this," Roush said coldly as he pinned the star on his vest. "I can give myself as much authority as Smith had. You're Holman, ain't you, fatty?" When Holman made no answer, he brought his gaze to Ingles. "That right, Parson?"

"That's right."

A contemptuous twist crooked Roush's lips. "I've always wondered what a lying, double-crossing hypocrite looked like. Now I know. You're going to pay, Holman. Right through your fat nose. Or maybe by your fat neck. You'll dig down for the taxes it takes to give us the geegaws the parson wants."

"Did Ingles send for you?" Holman asked hoarsely.

"He never heard of me till I poked my foot through his door tonight."

"Then who's paying you?"

Roush thumbed a new load into the cylinder of his gun. "Some things a man does without getting paid for, Holman. Look what Ingles is doing. I heard about his sermon, and I figgered he'd need a hand." He shoved his gun back into leather. "Now let's get busy. We'll need an emergency committee to run the town till we get a government. You want in on it, Holman?"

"No, and before this is over—"

Roush raised a hand. "No tough talk, Holman. Don't sound good coming from a fat man. If you want to throw some lead, I'll loan you an iron."

Holman shrank back against the wall. "I want no part of this committee."

"That's fine. You wouldn't be worth a damn anyhow. Just don't try to stop us." He faced Ingles. "Who's that?" he asked, nodding at Bellew.

"Inky Bellew, the newspaper editor."

Roush grunted an oath. "Newspapermen are usually like everybody else who think they have to bow and scrape around in front of the moneybags. He's probably no good, but he'll have to do. The medico's all right. We'll put him and you and the inkslinger on the emergency committee. Then you'll empower me to start cleaning house."

"What kind of a damned skin game is this?" Holman raged. "You have no power—"

"Power? What power did Smith have?" Roush demanded. "You pinned the star on him, and Solo James says 'You can wear it as long as you don't bother me.' I've got more power than that, Holman. The committe just gave it to me."

"Don't count on me." Bellew was chewing savagely on his pipestem. "I just came here to get the story."

"We are counting on you, Bellew." Roush patted his gun. "You start sliding out and I'll kick you clear into hell." Roush pinned his gaze on Ingles's face. "Parson, I know just what yellow-bellied dollar grabbers like Holman will do if we give 'em a chance, so we don't give 'em a chance. get some boards, a hammer, and a pocketful of nails."

"What for?" Ingles asked.

"We're taking a walk down to Hell's Acre, and we're nailing the doors of the Gay Lady shut so damned tight Solo James won't get 'em open till Christmas."

CHAPTER III

FOR the second time this evening Mark Ingles went against his better judgment in obeying the stranger's orders. He had not known how

this job he had set for himself could be done, but he thought it could be accomplished without violence. Now he knew it couldn't.

Ingles had never seen a man die the way Rednose Smith had. He would never forget it as long as he lived, yet it was, in a grim merciless way, the carrying out of a long overdue justice. Smith had killed at least three men since Ingles had been in Carney, and for no better reason than the fact that they had objected to being cheated by the gamblers in Solo James's Gay Lady.

It was inconceivable, Ingles thought as he brought the boards and hammer from the back of his house, that one man could close James's gambling hall. But then Roush was the kind of man who did inconceivable things.

"Bellew, you'll write this story and spread it across your front page," Roush was saying as Ingles came in. "Tell folks they're going to get some fair law for a change. Tell 'em the Gay Lady is shutting down until Holman throws James out and puts somebody in who will give 'em a square deal."

"You haven't closed the Gay Lady yet," Bellew objected. "Maybe I'd better wait."

"You're coming off the press tomorrow, ain't you?"

"Yes, but—"

"All right. The parson and me will close the Lady. You do that job of writing, Mister, or you've got trouble. Tell 'em Holman built the Gay Lady and that it's paying him more'n the Red Boy is. Tell 'em Rednose Smith was Holman's man, but it'll be different now. Tell 'em—"

"Don't print that, Bellew," Holman burst out.

"It's true, ain't it?" Roush's gun came out of leather. "No lies, fatty. It's a pleasure to shoot liars. Cleans the scum off the earth so the decent people can breathe."

The sight of Roush's gun lined on his fat stomach took the last trace of color from Holman's face. "It's partly true," he muttered, "but James runs the Lady. I'm not to blame for what goes on there."

"Oh, you're not to blame, are you? But you're willing to pocket half the take, ain't you? I've been around camps like this, Holman, and I've run into James more'n once. Every place he's operated from Montana to Arizona has been the same. The funny part is that he'll kill you the minute he doesn't need you, and he'll do it so slick nobody'll know he had a hand in it. All right, Parson. Let's get at it."

"Ingles, are you forgetting your positon so much that you're gracing this killer's scheme with your presence?" Holman demanded.

"I didn't know I had a position," Ingles said. "Sounds funny to hear you talk about me after you've been gracing James with your backing. Does Ann know that?"

There was a gray haggard look about Holman, the look of a man who sees life running out in a swift ebb tide and finds himself helpless to stop it. He dropped into a chair, his fat shoulders slack, his chins resting on his chest. He said dully, "No, she doesn't."

"Then she'll read it in this week's *News*." Ingles picked up his boards and hammer, and followed Roush to the door.

"Make that story good, inkslinger," Roush warned, "or I'll put holes in your guts."

ROUSH went out, Ingles behind him. Carney was alive now, the flares on Main Street throwing a murky light across the dust. Ingles and Roush walked in silence along the row of log cabins and tents, reached the business block, and threaded their way through the endless procession of ore wagons. They made the turn toward Hell's Acre, the noise of it a steadily growing growl beating against Mark Ingles's ears.

"Have we got any chance of coming through this alive?" Ingles asked.

Roush stopped and peered into Ingle's face in the uncertain light of the kerosene flares. Ingles, staring back, knew that he had no understanding of this man. He was a creature from another world, but his coming was a miracle that Ingles would not question.

"You want to back down, Parson?" Roush asked softly.

"No, but dead men won't do much cleaning up in Carney."

"We won't be dead men for a while. Come along."

They were in the fierce light of Hell's Acre then. A gunshot pierced the noise, and came again, the echoes swallowed in the steady roll of sound. The Gay Lady squatted in the middle of the block, a scattering of smaller buildings on both sides. She was like a mother hen that had hatched a dozen chicks as evil as herself. Through her, Albert Holman was taking back the wages he paid these men in the Red Boy.

They were swept along by the milling crowd, past a dance hall, and on toward the Gay Lady. A barker in front was crying, "Buck the tiger, gents. Any game you want to play. No limit under the sky. Beautiful girls to give you luck."

Roush and Ingles shouldered their way inside. Ingles had never been here before. He was shocked by the grandeur of it, and he wondered how much money Holman had put into it. It was a huge room lighted garishly by great chandeliers.

An ornately carved mahogany bar ran along one side and was now jammed three and four deep. On the other side the gambling tables were packed as deeply as the bar. Painted, tinsel-decked women sifted through the crowd. From somewhere in the back came the raucous banging of a piano. Two men brushed by Ingles, a limp body between them.

"Climb up on the bar, Parson," Roush said. "This is your deal."

Ingles slammed the boards across the bar top, scarring the polished mahogany. Fear had been in him and gone. This was what he had wanted. He was remembering he'd told Holman a man cannot look back once he has put his hand to the plow.

"Get to hell out of here with those boards," a floorman yelled. He lunged at Ingles and ran chin first into Ingles's fist. He bounced back, spilling against the men at the bar, and rolled off to the floor.

"Good punch, Parson," Roush encouraged.

Ingles vaulted to the bar top, but he received no attention until Roush's gun roared, the bullet smashing through one of the great chandeliers. He was atop the bar behind Ingles then, his great voice rising above the clamor of talk. "Listen to the parson, you sons of sin. Listen and do what he tells you, or I'll slap a bullet down your gullets."

It was tough talk, but Roush, both guns fisted, looked tough enough to make it stick. They turned to stare, miners and gamblers and girls and the rest of the motley crowd. Ingles's eyes ran the length of the room searching for the slim elegant figure of Solo James, but the boss of Hell's Acre was not in sight.

"We're closing the Lady," Ingles shouted. "An emergency committee composed of Doc McCabe, Inky Bellews, and myself will run the town until we can organize a legal government."

"You ain't man enough to fill the pants you're trying to wear, Preacher," a floorman bawled, and brought his gun up. He died with it half lifted. Roush's gun had roared once. Miners lunged away from the floorman, leaving him alone in the center of the big room to sway uncertainly a moment before he fell.

"I've known Solo James for years," Roush bellowed. "There ain't an operator in the Rockies who's as pizen mean as he is, and there ain't a bunch of plug-uglies in the state as ornery as this crowd he's got. Now you'd better

listen to what the parson's got to say, or James won't have no crew at all."

THERE was silence then, the faces of bearded miners and rouge-cheeked girls showing the panic of fear. It was unbelievable. Fantastic. Yet it was happening. It was a pool of quiet into which entered only the breathing of hundreds of human beings.

Roush stood there, unmoving, spread-legged, both guns cocked, his hair ruffled, black-garbed, a sinister figure with narrowed eyes hard and a mouth that was a thin wicked line.

"The parson brought the devil with him," someone whispered, and no one laughed.

"You're expecting to hear a sermon," Ingles said. "Or maybe you expect me to ask you to sign the pledge. Maybe later I'll do both, but tonight we're tackling the biggest job that any of us ever tried to do. We want to make Carney a decent town. We're starting here because this is the bottom."

"You can't stop us from—" a gambler began.

Roush swung on him. "Pull your iron, big-mouth."

"Let it go," the gambler cried hastily, and pressed back into the crowd.

"We'll organize a town government," Ingles went on. "We'll have a school. We'll have a jail and a marshal who will enforce the laws fairly, not the way Rednose Smith has done. We'll have a water system that will give us protection against fire and epidemics."

"What's that got to do with closing the Gay Lady?" a miner asked.

"I said this was the beginning. If the other places don't clean up, we'll close them. If a man has to drink, he's entitled to what you call decent liquor at a fair price. If he has to gamble, he's entitled to games that aren't crooked. If he buys a room, he's entitled to wake up in the morning with his money in his pocket."

These men knew far better than Mark Ingles the poor quality of liquor that Solo James sold. They knew what chance they ran when they bucked the games, and many were remembering they'd been put to bed upstairs to wake up in the morning with their pockets empty. They cheered Ingles in a way he didn't expect, and one man yelled, "If we wasn't damned fools, we wouldn't be here."

"We're giving you till midnight to wind up your games and finish your drinking," Roush shouted. "We're nailing up the back door now, and we'll nail the front one shut at twelve o'clock. If Solo James is here and don't like it, this is a good time for him to make his kick."

But Solo James didn't appear to make a kick, and Roush's nod was enough to point out the reason for James's continued absence.

"If you didn't know it, gents," Roush said after a moment's pause, "Holman has a half interest in the Lady. He pays you your wages on Saturday night, and he's got 'em back by Monday morning. From now on Holman's going to run things right."

Ingles and Roush stepped down from the bar. They moved to the back, the crowd falling away before them.

"You're doing a good job, Parson," a miner called.

"You've got the guts it takes," another said.

There was a tingle of pride in Mark Ingles as he followed Roush through a back room piled high with beer barrels. They went into the alley, and Roush slammed the double doors shut. Ingles nailed three boards across them and stepped back to where Roush stood. He asked, "Why did you say anything about Holman?"

"He's your key man, but he won't be hard to topple with Rednose Smith out of the way. He'll find out what kind of huckleberry Solo James is to boot. That's why I mentioned Holman. I wanted to give James something to work on."

They left the alley and made the turn toward the street, Ingles think-

ing about this and not liking it. Somehow Holman didn't belong in the same pigeonhole with Smith and James. Besides, he was Ann's father.

"I know what you're thinking, Parson," Roush said softly, "and you're plumb wrong. Holman is rotten. The Gay Lady wouldn't be here if it wasn't for him. The reason he's bucking you isn't because he don't like to pay taxes. It's because he wants an open camp so James can run the Lady like he wants to. Maybe he'll learn a lesson before the night's over, but it's a damned sure thing James won't."

When they reached the corner of the building, Roush yawned loudly. "Well, I guess you can finish the job, Parson. You come back and nail the front door up. You won't have any trouble now."

"Where are you going?" Ingles asked as Roush turned away.

"I'm going to rent a livery rig and drive on to Ouray. There's a job down there that needs doing."

CHAPTER IV

INGLES'S house was empty when he returned. He looked at his watch. It was nine-thirty. He paced the floor for a time, thinking about Ann, knowing that Albert Holman would either be a changed man or a dead one before the night was over. He thought about this man Roush who had appeared so mysteriously, about Rednose Smith and the miner in the Gay Lady calling him the devil. Ingles smiled bleakly. There was no doubt about the satanic appearance of the gunman as he'd stood beside Ingles on the bar.

Sometime before midnight Solo James came surreptitiously to the back door the way Roush had come earlier in the evening. He slid in the instant Ingles opened the door to his knock, one hand in his pocket. He stared over his shoulder into the darkness and immediately moved from the door so that his back was to the wall.

"I have a derringer in my pocket, Preacher," James said coldly. "Don't get the notion you'd like to grab me and hold me for your friend Roush. He pulled out for Ouray an hour ago in a livery rig."

He was a slim, foppishly dressed man smelling of perfume, his brown curly hair carefully combed, a heavy gold chain dangling across his flowered waistcoat. A huge diamond glittered on the index finger of his right hand. Ingles had never been this close to him before. He was exactly as Ingles had pictured him: smooth, cunning, and entirely vicious.

"I have no intention of grabbing you for Roush," Ingles said mildly.

James's cat-green eyes were pinned on Ingles. As he watched the man, it occurred to Ingles that there was much of the feline in James, in the way he moved and in his mental makeup. He'd kill a man as quickly as Roush would, but in a different way. He'd use a knife, or a gun in the night from a secret place.

"You were in the Lady when we were there, weren't you?" Ingles asked.

"You're damned right," James breathed. "I watched the whole thing. The man Roush killed was one of my best."

"Why didn't you come and make your kick?"

James's smile was small and cruel. "You don't fight Roush that way if you want to live. The man's a devil, Parson. How did you get him?"

"He came to the door."

James laughed loud. "Right handy, wasn't it? How much did you pay him, and how did a pilgrim like you know how to get hold of him?"

"I didn't pay him anything and I didn't get hold of him."

"You're a better preacher than a liar." James ran a hand over his carefully combed hair. "How did Roush come to pull out before the job was done?"

"I don't know."

"My guess is you paid him too soon." James shrugged. "Roush will

double-cross you as soon as I would. If he'd stayed it would have been tough. Now it's a matter of time."

"What do you mean?"

"You want to be sure you've got a winning hand before you bet your pile, Preacher," James said sardonically. "I've got one. When I kill you, McCabe and Bellew won't make any more trouble. We'll still have an open camp. Holman will be swinging from a limb, and that'll fix it so I won't do any more splitting with him."

Ingles stared at the gambler's evil mocking face. He felt a weakness in his legs. A film of sweat on his forehead made a bright shine in the lamplight. Even as he stood here, he heard the rumble of a mob in the street.

"There they go," James taunted. "It took some free liquor and some good talking, but it wasn't too hard to convince 'em that Holman needed a rope. Rolling in money up there in his fine house while he paid them stinking low wages. Made me run crooked games so he'd have bigger profits."

James's soft laugh was sandpaper on Ingles's raw temper. "You might have stopped 'em, Preacher, so I'll hold you till the racket is the loudest. Then I'll plug you. I've got my alibi all fixed. I'm in my office, so it couldn't be me."

THE mob was streaming by outside, the flames of the kerosene torches throwing a murky light into the street, its clamor a spine-chilling rumble. Ingles clenched his fists and wheeled from the window to stare at James. For the first time in his life Mark Ingles was looking squarely into the face of death.

"Maybe you've learned to keep your nose out of other people's business," James mocked. "Only thing is you won't live long enough to profit by what you've learned."

The mob had spilled by and raced up the hill to the Holman house. It wouldn't be long. A matter of minutes. Strangely enough, Ingles was not thinking about his own death. He was thinking about Albert Holman and Ann, about the gunman Roush who had left town before this thing was finished. Now Mark Ingles was beaten. His death would not lessen the evil that Hell's Acre had spawned here.

Ingles took a step toward James, the knuckles of his fists white. There was a good ten feet between him and the gambler, too much distance to cover before the derringer in James's pocket flamed, but it was better to die that way than to stand still and wait for death.

"They'll string him up," James was saying. "Then they'll fill him full of lead. That's when you'll get it."

Ingles heard his own breathing. He felt a chill travel along his spine, a drop of sweat run down his cheek. Time ran on and grew thin and there was no noise in the room but the ticking of a clock that sounded ominously loud.

Then it broke. There was a knock at the front door. Solo James, held tight by the tension, turned his head. It was an involuntary action that took only part of a second. It was enough. The derringer roared as Ingles rushed in, the bullet slicing through Ingles's coat and raising a red welt along his ribs.

Ingles's fists rocked the gambler's head. James pawed at him and went back against the wall. He tried to slide sideways, tried to pull a Colt from a shoulder holster, but he was helpless before Ingles's battering fists. He staggered, his head beating against the wall. He kicked at Ingles and missed. Then the starch went out of his knees, and he fell forward to meet Ingles's upswinging fist. He was out cold when he hit the floor.

"Mark! Oh, Mark!" It was Ann. She was in his arms as he turned to her. "Mark, they're going to hang Dad."

"Get Doc McCabe and Inky Bellew," Ingles cried. "We may be too late, but we'll try."

Ingles ran up the street toward the Holman house. The mob was shifting around under a big spruce, the leaping light from the torches giving the scene a grotesque appearance. Some of the men were shouting derisively at Holman, others were cursing.

Tearing a picket from the fence, Ingles hit the fringe of the mob with the fury of a wild man. The picket was a lethal weapon in his hand. Two went down. A third yelled and dropping his torch, grabbed his bleeding fingers. They opened up before him, surprised into a moment of panic, not knowing who or what he was. He reached the tree, beat one of James's men across the face, slashed his wrist as he pulled a gun.

The noose was around Holman's neck. He was swinging when Ingles reached him. The man holding the rope let go and cried out when the picket crashed against the side of his head. Holman plummeted to the ground.

It took only seconds to recover from the surprise of Ingles's attack. One of James's men yelled, "It's the damned preacher. We'll swing him, too."

Then guns began to roar. One man went into a spinning fall. Another yelled in agony. The mob melted before those flaming guns. Solo James, racing toward the spruce tree, came into the light of their torches. He saw the man with the guns, cried out a shrill curse, and reached for his Colt in the shoulder holster. He died with a chunk of lead in his heart. He fell against the picket fence and hung

there, a grim witness that justice, long absent from Carney, had come at last.

Ingles had loosened the rope around Holman's neck and propped him against the trunk of the spruce.

"He's all right." It was Roush, both guns palmed.

HOLMAN felt his neck, still laboring for breath. "Solo James worked them up to this," he said hoarsely. "I heard them talk."

"It's what one money-hungry fool will do to another," Roush rasped. "You're a pious talker, Holman, but for my money you're as low as they come."

Holman struggled to his feet and stood with his shoulders against the spruce. Slowly he raised a hand to his rope-burned neck. "That's right," he said. "They don't come any lower. Seemed like I was looking clear across the horizon into eternity when I was swinging there."

"I'm going to Ouray tomorrow, and I'm taking Ingles with me," Roush said coldly. "He's too good a man to preach to sinners like you."

"It's sinners like us that need him, Roush," Holman said with a humility that was new in him. "He'll stay here because he's the kind of man who keeps working at a job till it's done. This time I'm going to help him."

Ingles and Roush were in the business block when they met Ann and McCabe hurrying toward the Holman house.

"He's all right, Ann," Ingles said.

"Oh, Mark," the girl cried. "It's a miracle." She ran past him.

"I'm really pulling out in the morning, Parson," Roush said, holding his hand out to Ingles. "This time I won't sneak back to see what Solo James is going to pull out of his hat."

"He thought you'd double-crossed me," Ingles said, gripping the gunman's hand.

Roush's smile cut much of the austerity from his face. "A man like James judges everybody else by his own standards. I don't think you'll have any trouble. If you do, just whistle. Now you'd better go see your girl. I'll see that the Lady gets her front door nailed up. I'll get a hammer and some boards from Bellew."

Roush strode away, a sinister dark-garbed figure. McCabe, staring after him, asked softly, "Parson, do you think the devil goes around doing good?"

"No, Doc. Not the devil, but sometimes it is beyond understanding the way a kind and omniscient Providence works things out for us mortals."

Inky Bellew was slouched down in a chair when Roush returned with his hammer. He asked, "All done?"

"She's wound up and tied down."

Bellew dug a handful of gold coins out of his pocket and handed them to Roush. "I knew you were tough enough for the job."

Roush jingled the coins. "You ought to tell them, Inky."

"No." Bellew cuffed back his eyeshade. "I don't want anybody thinking I'm civic-minded or maybe felt sorry for a damned good preacher."

"I shouldn't take this dinero. It was a pleasure squaring a debt with Smith and James that went plumb back to Bannack." The gunman shrugged and dropped the coins into his pocket. "I heard once that a workman was worthy of his hire. Guess I'll just keep my pay. I'd hate like hell for anybody to get the notion I was soft-hearted."

"Nobody would get that notion, Roush," Bellew murmured, "but after what Ingles has done I didn't think you'd have the gall to pocket that dinero."

Roush scowled belligerently for a moment. Then he slammed the gold down on Bellew's desk. "Damn you, Bellew, what'd you have to say that for? Give it to Ingles for his school." Wheeling, the gunman stamped out.

Owlhoot Masquerader

By

Wilson L. Covert

It took an avalanche and the faith of a pretty girl to show an owlhooter what to do with his long-rider loot.

A ROLLING blast shook the side of Powderhorn Mountain. The leather-faced rider with the gray-tinged mustache, in the garb of a prosperous cattleman, threw a startled glance at the rock-stippled slope above the trail he was traversing. Small boulders and loose earth, set in motion by the explosion,

were sliding down the face of the mountain, raising a pall of yellow dust.

"Some hard-rock miner workin' yonder side of old Powderhorn," Cole Wyatt said to himself. "Appears he's started an avalanche, and we'd better dust out of here!"

He slashed with his spurs, and his horse lunged into a gallop. But the sliding mass, gathering momentum, was coming faster than Wyatt's bronc could lay hoof to the rocky path. Its roar dinned in his ears, blanching his saddle-brown cheeks. His steel-gray eyes were fixed on a margin of trail where he judged the avalanche would not strike, all the while plying spur and quirt, his voice rising in a sudden frenzy of urging to the pounding horse.

It was not in Cole Wyatt's make-up to quit, even with the odds against him. He was still trying desperately to ride out of the danger zone when the falling mass of earth and rock hit.

Fortunately there was more dirt than rocks, and the smashing pace of Wyatt's scared bronc had carried him to a point where the landslide thinned out. Horse and rider were engulfed in the tumbling mass, but not swept from the mountain trail, which was wide enough for two wagons to pass each other without scraping hubs.

Wyatt came to his senses choking in the dusty air. His lungs seemed full of it, but his head was in the open, with earth packed around his body, holding him as in the jaws of a vise. The whinnying of his horse called Cole's attention to the equine head upthrust from the mound of earth a short distance away. The force of the avalanche had torn them apart.

"If we ain't buried alive," muttered Wyatt, "we're the next thing to it." His neck and facial muscles corded with the effort to loosen the earth imprisoning him, but it was useless. "That fool-hen of a miner ought've heard the landslide and looked to see if anyone was caught in it, this bein' a regularly traveled trail."

Cole Wyatt should know. He had ridden it many times, usually at night, with an eye-holed bandanna on his face and a pack of saddle lobos at his heels. All of them but Wyatt were dead or scattered to the four winds. He had survived, to return three years after the big manhunt that had finished his outlaw rule, and bog down in an avalanche! It upset his plans. He was scanning the mountaintop for some sign of the miner who had started the trouble, when the rattle of wheels drew his eyes downward. A buckboard, driven by a girl, was stopping in the trail.

THERE was no doubt of her amazement to discover tons of earth and rock spilled across the road. The trapped bronc's neighing caught her attention. When Wyatt shouted, he saw her eyes widen as they rested on him. She leaped over the front wheel and climbed up the side of the mass that blocked the mountain trail.

Slim and tanned, with thick braids of hair like ripe corn wound about her head, she made Cole Wyatt think of the daughter he had buried years ago, with her mother, during a smallpox epidemic. It had been the loss of his family, as much as anything, that had turned Cole's steps toward the owlhoot. He'd been reckless in his youth, and with the home ties severed, not caring what happened to him, the old recklessness had broken out again.

"That blast," said the girl, when Wyatt explained how he came to be in such a fix, "was set off by old Roddy Mason. He's sure there's gold in old Powderhorn, if he can only reach it. But his dynamiting never caused a landslide before. How'll I ever dig you out, Mister? I haven't a shovel with me, only mail sacks."

"But this here Mason has, without doubt," returned Wyatt.

"Am I stupid!" exclaimed the girl. "His claim's on the other side of the mountain. It'll take a little time to get him. Are you hurt?"

"Can't tell for sure," said Cole. "But there's somethin' you can tell me, missy—your name."

"It's June McClain. My dad's the postmaster at Burnside. Who're you?"

Wyatt was prepared to answer that question. Burnside was his destination. It had been a fair-sized town in his night-riding days. He didn't believe anyone there or on the surrounding range had ever seen him unmasked. He was just a fearsome name, a hard-spurring, shadowy horseman, a spurt of gunflame on a lonely trail. But, returning for something he couldn't take with him when he was only a jump ahead of the law, he had laid his plans carefully.

"I'm Jerry Sawyer, a cattle buyer," said Wyatt.

He watched June McClain climb the mountainside. She did it very nimbly, and sooner than Wyatt expected, he saw her coming back with an oldster in flop-brimmed hat and dirt-incrusted shirt and trousers. Roddy Mason owned to a slight deafness, said he hadn't heard the rumble of the avalanche, but dived into his mine tunnel before the smoke cleared. He appeared relieved that Wyatt hadn't been killed, but it was plain the quest of gold obsessed him. He handed one of the two shovels he had brought to June, and both began to dig.

When the earth around Wyatt had been cleared away sufficiently for them to pull him out, his right leg dragged. A broken leg meant weeks of inactivity. He regarded it with misgiving. To remain too long on the scene of his earlier depredations might not be safe.

"You can stay with us, Mr. Sawyer," offered June McClain. "We'd be pleased to have you. Help me get him into the buckboard, Roddy."

Wyatt had no money. He knew where there was plenty, but he must be able to walk before he could lay hands on it. He'd have to accept the hospitality of the McClains and bluff it out until the leg mended. Seated moodily in the buckboard, he watched the old miner and the girl dig out his horse. It was in better shape than Wyatt, a fact that afforded him a measure of relief. If luck went against him, at least he would have a horse on which to flee.

OLD Roddy Mason climbed back up the mountain, shaking his head over what folks would say when they found the mountain road impassable. June McClain turned her team in the trail and sent the horses scampering in the direction of Burnside. When they drove into the main street, the town didn't look as Cole Wyatt remembered it. Now it looked sort of poverty-stricken. He remarked on this to the girl.

"Burnside's going downhill, I'm afraid," June answered. "Partly it's due to a gang of owlhooters, who prey on the town and the ranches. Some of our more prosperous stockmen have moved out. And Burnside has always depended on the cattle trade. We don't know who the owlhooters are; that is, we're not sure."

Wyatt sat straighter, not minding the pain of his leg, Some other wild bunch evidently had taken up where his gang had left off. But at least he had never raided Burnside.

"You talk like you suspect somebody, Miss June."

"Yes," she said. "The Moulton outfit, back in the hills. Lot Moulton is young and gun-tough. Nearly everyone stands in awe of him. Not the McClains, though—or Bill Wagram."

The way she spoke the last name brought a smile to Wyatt's sweat-beaded face. "This Wagram a special friend of yours?"

June nodded. "Very special. He works for Macfall, the blacksmith.

Macfall's been talking of selling out. If Bill had three thousand dollars he'd buy the place and we'd be married."

"I see," said Wyatt. "This Moulton runs a brand in the hills, does he?"

"Yes." June slowed the horses as they neared a cottage with a well-kept yard, surrounded by a picket fence. "Runs it on cattle that aren't his own, maybe. You're a cattle buyer, but I guess you wouldn't want to do business with Lot, Mr. Sawyer. Well, here we are. There's Ma at the window, wondering why I'm back without making the rural delivery."

When the Burnside physician set Wyatt's leg, he said cheerfully, "You'll be around, good as ever, in eight to ten weeks."

Inwardly, Wyatt groaned. He said, "All right, Doc, I'll settle when I'm on my feet."

Cole Wyatt had thought of himself as a hardened outlaw, dead to any good influence, when Roddy Mason's dynamiting played hob with his plans. But after a week in the McClain family circle, he wasn't so sure. It awakened pleasant memories, not unmixed with pain. His eyes followed June wherever she went, for she reminded him more and more of the daughter he had lost. He hated inventing lies about the cattle company he was supposed to represent. He winced when the girl began calling him "Uncle Jerry." What if she knew he was Cole Wyatt, whose name was still anathema in or out of Burnside? Those range country folks had long memories.

One night Bill Wagram called. He was a bronzed young giant who talked guns and horses, but said he wasn't cut out for a cowhand. Bill wanted to be a farrier. He'd got his start in it during an enlistment at a cavalry post, and now wanted his own smithy. Had a chance, too, if he only knew how to raise the money before someone else bought out Macfall.

On a certain day, when he sat in a porch rocker with the mending leg propped on a stool, June near by, working on embroidery, Wyatt got a look at Lot Moulton and company. They clattered past the cottage, seven of them, led by a dark-faced man in his twenties, who swept off his snake-banded sombrero and bowed to June. She nodded in return, then said to Wyatt:

"That's Lot, Uncle Jerry, and I wouldn't trust him as far as the next corner. But he's lightning with those guns."

"Fancy-lookin' feller," commented Cole. "Got a passel of plug-uglies with him if I ever saw any."

TOWNSFOLK and local stockmen visited Wyatt as the weeks went by, the ranchers having learned from the postmaster that he was a big company buyer. Cole kept his six-gun handy, though he hoped to the Lord he'd never have to start shooting while he was under the McClains' roof. Recalling many of his visitors, he watched uneasily for any sign of recognition on their part, telling the stock raisers he'd call around to look over their herds when he was able to sit saddle.

The first day he could walk without a cane, Cole Wyatt awaited nightfall with mixed emotions. He could now get what he had come after, settle his debt to the doctor and the McClains, so far as money could repay that family's kindness, and ride away, but there were other matters he didn't like to leave in an unsettled state.

Stealthily, Wyatt left the McClain house by the rear door, carrying his saddlebags and the spade which the postmaster used to dig his garden. He walked rapidly toward the rustling cottonwoods lining a creek, a good rifleshot from Burnside's back yards. One night, three years ago, Cole had put a blaze on a certain tree. He had seen the weathered

mark again the first time he could hobble to the creek.

Reaching the cottonwood, Wyatt stepped off ten paces to the west. It brought him to a patch of weeds. He didn't believe anyone had stumbled on his cache, but he would soon know. He felt a twinge of pain in the mended leg as he sunk the broad blade to turn the first spadeful of earth.

Wyatt was sweating by the time the spade struck metal. A little later he scooped out the box he was seeking, stuffed the coins and greenbacks it contained into his saddlebags. He hurled the empty box into the creek, where it sank. As he turned to leave footsteps coming from the direction of town made him crouch down in the tall weeds, laying hand to holster.

A man passed his covert, going toward the stream. It was Bill Wagram. He paused on the lip of the bank, and Wyatt thought he was going to take a night swim. Then the clop of hoofs sounded westward, and the hoot of an owl came eerily through the darkness. Wagram answered, as poor an imitation as the first was good.

"What're them fellers usin' the owlhoot call for?" wondered Cole, disquieted because one of them was June McClain's fiancé.

He was uncertain of the other's identity until the horseman came into sight and halted. Wagram said, "Hello, Lot. You're right on time."

"Always am," replied Lot Moulton, hunching on his saddlehorn. "Well, made up your mind to ride with us, Bill?"

"This once, Lot. It's been a tough thing to decide. If it wasn't that I don't see no other way of gettin' the cash in time to buy that blacksmith shop, I wouldn't agree to your proposition."

Moulton emitted a harsh laugh. "You'll never make money easier, Bill. I knew you needed some. Meet us at the Forks tomorrow night at eight, ready for business. Sure I can count on you now?"

"I'll be there," said Wagram. "But I don't like it."

"Shucks, Bill, you ought to grow up," said Moulton, turning his horse. "Be seein' you."

The outlaw trotted up the bank and disappeared. Wagram walked slowly back toward Burnside. Wyatt thought a minute, then started after him, leaving his money-weighted saddlebags and spade in the weeds. Wagram swung about as he heard the pad of pursuing feet, and Cole sensed that the young blacksmith had reached for a gun.

"Who's that?" Wagram hissed.

"Jerry Sawyer—and leave that gun be!"

WYATT went closer, until he could see the younger man's staring eyes. "You'd make a mighty poor owlhooter, Bill, which is to your credit. Wait now! I was takin' a little pasear before turnin' in, happened to overhear you and Moulton. I like you, and I like that girl you're aimin' to marry. I wouldn't want you throwin' in with them longriders. If you figure you could side 'em once and call it quits, you're dead wrong."

"I—" began Wagram desperately.

"Let me do the talkin'. Drop this outlaw business, and I'll advance you the three thousand to take over Macfall's smithy. And tell me who Moulton is plannin' to raid tomorrow night."

Wagram couldn't speak for a minute. "Mr. Sawyer, you're a white man! I didn't want to—"

"I know," Cole interrupted. "About that raid, Bill—don't feel like a lowdown snitch in tellin', because that Moulton is a pizen diamondback who'll get his head shot off sooner or later."

"It's the Half Moon ranch," said Wagram, "over near the Rabbit Buttes. There's around a hundred

Herefords in the west pasture that Moulton's had his eye on for a week."

"Fine!" exclaimed Wyatt. "I'll inform the owner and side him when the raiders show up. Ain't time to get the sheriff from the county seat. You go on home, sayin' nothin' to nobody, and I'll see you in the mornin' about the money."

Wyatt waited for Wagram's footsteps to die out, then returned to the weed patch. He was surprised at his own actions, at the change that had come over him in the past weeks. He wasn't doing as he had planned at all. Getting back into the house without arousing the McClains was ticklish business, but he managed it.

Groping his way to the spare room he occupied, he shoved the saddlebags under the bed. They had been filled with odds and ends, which he had disposed of and replaced with the loot. The McClains, accustomed to seeing the bulky saddlebags, wouldn't know but that they had contained money all along.

The next day Wyatt squared his debts. When he told June he was lending Bill the money to buy out Macfall, she looked at him with shining eyes, then her arms went round his neck. The kiss she gave him made Cole feel it was all right if he never got a cent back. Before noon he saw the smithy change hands.

After lunch he saddled his horse, saying he was riding out to Rabbit Buttes to see what grade of cattle the Half Moon had for sale. The owner, Ike Deems, had been one of Wyatt's victims when he was riding wild. There was irony in the fact that he was now setting forth to prevent a raid on Deem's stock.

The grizzled rancher thought Wyatt had come to buy when he eased out of of leather at the ranch house door, favoring his right leg. After Cole told him he was likely to be visited by rustlers, Ike hit the ceiling. He mentioned Lot Moulton right off, but Wyatt didn't say it was Moulton. On Wagram's account, he couldn't talk too much.

With a half-dozen cowhands, Deems and Wyatt rode out to the west pasture as the sun was going down. They drove the cattle back from the line fence, so that they wouldn't impede any lead when the shooting started. Then they sought cover in range of the only gate in two miles of barbed wire, where the rustlers were almost certain to enter.

Cole Wyatt, watching the stars come out, felt a little strange to be waiting for a crack at longriders. He'd been in the same pasture himself, years ago, hazing Half Moon critters for the open and the rustler's market with a smoking six-gun. If Ike Deems, lying in a grassy hollow a few yards away, had known that, very likely Cole wouldn't have lasted to hear the hoofbeats which presently drummed out of the south.

The horsemen came up to the gate, and Wyatt rose on his knees, pistol in hand. He couldn't tell which dim rider was Moulton until they were well inside the pasture, but he wanted to make sure of Lot.

THEN the overeager Deems pulled a boner. He let drive before the gate was open. Probably he missed, for no saddle was emptied. But the raiders, reining back from the fence, pitched flaming lead into the pasture. Deems, charging wildly from the hollow, went down yelling:

"I got it in the hip!"

"Ought've got it in your fool head!" muttered Wyatt, on his feet and running toward the fence, his gun pounding. Deems's cowboys were charging, too, firing as they ran. Some of that lead must have damaged the rustlers, though none toppled from the dancing horses. Lot Moulton's outfit kept their triggers working as they retreated. A cowhand plowed his face in the dirt. Another stumbled, recovered his balance to stagger on a few paces and finally fall.

From the dubious shelter of a fence post, Wyatt's .45 slammed, and a fleeing rider swayed forward on his horse's neck. Then they were gone, dipping down into a grassy swale. Grimly, Cole turned back to organize pursuit, shoving cartridges into his cutter. But, with two men killed and the boss unable to straddle leather, he couldn't get the others to go with him.

"If it's the Moulton gang," said Deems, writhing on the ground with his hip wound, "they'd toll you on to the ranch, where no such handful of men would have a white chip chance. We've paid a high price already for savin' these cattle. Obliged for your help, Sawyer. Them raiders are as big a nuisance as another gang that pestered us three years ago—Cole Wyatt's."

"I wouldn't know 'em," said Cole. Then he added angrily, "If you hadn't cut loose too soon, we'd have had the gang where we could mow 'em down." He stalked off in disgust, to mount and head back for Burnside.

Wyatt visited the blacksmith shop early the next morning. Bill Wagram didn't seem worried because Moulton's outfit had escaped the night before, but Cole told him to hitch on a gun under his leather apron. A customer came to have his horse shod all around.

Bill had just finished, was watching the man mount in front of the shop, when five horsebackers swung into the main street. Wagram spoke over his shoulder to a shadowy figure by the forge, but held his ground at the smithy door. The clatter of hoofs ended as the five reined to a dusty halt. Lot Moulton's glittering eyes lifted to the new sign over the doorway, then dropped to Wagram's tense face. He said, low and menacing:

"You're the owner now, eh, Bill? You didn't meet us last night."

"No," said Wagram. "Changed my mind."

"But you put Ike Deems on his guard, and we had two boys crippled. We didn't get what we went after. And Deems, bein' grateful, made you a loan. Maybe you were one of the fellows in the west pasture."

"I wasn't," returned Wagram, "and I got no money from Ike Deems."

"Then where'd you get the cash to buy out Macfall?" snarled Moulton, right hand an inch from his gun. "I know you squealed—"

Cole Wyatt stepped out of the shop, thumbs caught in his gunbelt. "I loaned him the money. Your name's Moulton, ain't it?"

Lot nodded, studying Cole with hard, wary eyes. Evidently he wasn't sure how much Wyatt had overheard. When the latter didn't say anything, some of the tenseness went out of Moulton's lean body.

"We ain't met before, but I understand you're Jerry Sawyer, a cattle buyer."

BEFORE Wyatt could answer, an oldish, whiskered man leaned forward in his saddle. He had been gazing sharply at Wyatt since he moved into the sunlight, a doubtful look in his bloodshot eyes that had changed to certainty. He asked:

"You ever live around these parts, Mr. Sawyer?"

Cole glanced at him quickly. He couldn't remember ever having seen the whiskered face until that moment, but the man's expression said plainly that he recognized Wyatt. This was what he had dreaded if he lingered overlong in Burnside.

Cole said flatly. "No, I never lived here."

The outlaw grinned. "You sure your name's Sawyer?"

Wyatt was saved from answering that. Moulton turned irritably on the questioner. "What you gettin' at, Hodder? Shut up! Maybe we can do some business with Mr. Sawyer." He faced Wyatt again. "If it's prime beef stuff, two- and three-year olds, you're lookin' for, we have 'em. Come out to the ranch in a few days."

Wyatt's mind worked swiftly. "I had a leg broke recent, as you might've heard, and I ain't ridin' much yet, Moulton. Suppose you drive in fifty head so I can look 'em over. If I'm satisfied, I'll take all you got to sell."

Avarice lighted Moulton's eyes. "Glad to oblige you, Sawyer. You just set around and rest the leg. We'll fetch in a sample herd."

Ignoring Wagram, he lifted his reins to ride on, the whole troop sweeping after him. Wyatt saw Hodder glance back at him, then swing his spurs to catch up with Moulton.

Wagram turned to enter the smithy, then paused, his brow furrowed. "Sure you know what you're doin', Mr. Sawyer? Lot will try to sell you stolen cows."

Cole smiled. "I hope so, Bill. I can tell a worked brand as well as the next man. We'll trap 'em, don't you see? They'd 'a' been pushin' up the grass roots long ago if folks had got together and ganged up on 'em. We'll win quicker, fightin' the outfit here, than at their home ranch. That's the reason I asked Moulton to drive in with a bunch when he gave me an openin'. Now I've got to make the rounds and talk these townfolks into standin' up against the longriders."

Wagram grinned broadly. "You can put me at the head of your list, Mr. Sawyer! If you rid the country of those outlaws, you'll be the greatest benefactor that ever came down the road." He sobered suddenly. "Don't like to think how close I came to joinin' 'em."

"A miss," said Cole, "is good as a mile." But he was thinking of Hodder, the man who knew he was Cole Wyatt, outlaw. Disaster had been averted once, by a hair. It wouldn't make any difference to Lot Moulton when he learned of "Sawyer's" identity, not so long as he sold the cattle. And it was unlikely he'd smell a rat. But Wyatt would be taking a long chance of Hodder giving him away to the townsmen when the outfit came back and found he'd tricked them.

"If I had any sense," muttered Cole, striding downstreet with the clang of Wagram's sledge in his ears, "I'd saddle and git while the road's open. But I ain't — not a lick of sense."

He was even surer of it several days later, still waiting for Lot Moulton's outfit to return with the stock. They were taking a long time, but Cole guessed he knew why. The cattle had to be stolen first, then rebranded. Burnside folks had rallied behind Wyatt with an enthusiasm that left no doubt they would give a good account of themselves. Several cowmen, dropping into town, had promised to be on hand. Lot Moulton was assured of a hot-lead reception.

BUT it was old Roddy Mason, the miner, who showed up first. He'd been in town a couple of hours, his saddle horse and pack burro standing by the general merchandise store, when Wyatt drifted by. Mason came out of the store with a long face. He nodded to Cole, asked how the leg was.

"You see me walkin', don't you?" restored Wyatt; then he grinned. "Step over to the saloon and have a drink with me, old donker."

"That I will," said Roddy. "But to tell you the truth, I'd a heap rather have a load of supplies, includin' dynamite. I'm right on the edge of a discovery that'll not only benefit me but every man, woman, and child in this section, account of the boom that'll follow. But do you think I can find a grubstaker? Not one! They all say I'm locoed, that there ain't no gold in Powderhorn Mountain." His eyes blazed. "I know there is!"

Maybe old Roddy was right, Wyatt didn't know. He'd seen miners who always believed a bonanza was around the next hill, but never struck it, and others who became millionaires. Cole was willing to gamble on

Roddy. He might not be around to get anything out of it, but Mason's success would mean prosperity for town and range, and help to square Cole with the folks he'd once robbed.

"We'll have that drink and talk it over, Roddy," he said. "C'mon."

When Mason left Burnside, he was outfitted for three months, though he swore he'd be back with good news before the end of a month. More days passed without a sign of the Moulton outfit. Stockmen had ridden in, bringing a few cowhands. They began to fidget over the delay. Wyatt quieted them with the assurance: "Moulton will never pass up the chance to make a hundred per cent profit. Take my word for it."

Two weeks from the day he had talked to Moulton by the blacksmith shop, a herd of Herefords filled the main street of Burnside with dust and sound. As the whitefaces were hazed toward the town corral, empty at the moment, armed men ducked out of the back doors of dwellings, stores, and saloons, to take up positions in shooting range of the big pen. Lot Moulton and his riders were quite unaware of these preparations. Cole Wyatt had been standing on the McClain porch as the herd plodded by, shouting to Lot:

"I'll be right down to look at 'em!"

June McClain followed Wyatt to the gate, looking worried. Two men she thought a lot of, in different ways, were presently going to swap lead with that bunch of desperadoes. All seven of the gang were along.

She said, "Please be careful, Uncle Jerry."

Cole said, "Whatever happens, June, don't think hard of me."

"Think hard of you," she repeated. "If Bill's hurt, you mean? I wouldn't hold you to blame, Uncle Jerry. Those outlaws have got to go. I'll be saying a little prayer for you and Bill."

Wyatt didn't correct her mistake as he opened the gate. Maybe Hodder and the rest would die too quickly to talk. He worked his gun up and down in the scabbard as he approached the corral. The Herefords were penned, Moulton and his men lounging in saddles, smoking. Knowing where to look, Cole caught the glint of sunlight on gun steel in the hands of waiting townsmen and rangemen. He climbed the fence near Lot Moulton, cast his eye over the bawling Herefords.

"I reckon," said Lot, "you can't find no fault with 'em."

But Cole had seen a scarcely healed brand, and another. "No—except they ain't yours, Moulton! You ought've waited a bit longer for them burnt brands to peel!"

Moulton spit out his quirly, his face flaming. "You're a fine one to holler about brand blottin', you old cow thief! Hodder knows you!"

"Sure do!" bellowed Hodder. "You're Cole Wyatt! You held me up once, shot me when I put up a fight, and thought I was dead. I seen you take off your mask that time, and you ain't changed much. Heard talk you had cached your loot somewhere, and I reckoned that's what you aimed to buy cows with!"

COLE knew the hidden fighting men had heard every word. There was no use denying anything. "All right, I'm Cole Wyatt, but I'm helpin' clean up you saddle lobos!"

He jerked his gun as Moulton's hands slashed down. Cole was a shade quicker, his .45 exploding so close to Lot's vest that it smoked, the bullet smashing him sidewise out of the saddle. Wyatt leaped from the fence as the other rustlers conjured sixes into their hands. Stepping over the feebly moving Moulton, he slanted his Colt across Lot's saddle, beading Hodder, seeing him spill headfirst with his gun trailing smoke, before Lot's panicky horse plunged away from the corral.

Wyatt crouched against the fence, swapping shots with the wheeling

riders. Lead knocked off his hat, ripped his shirt. Then the hidden guns tuned up, catching the five remaining stock thieves in a crossfire. Two were unhorsed. Their three companions, turning to ride the other way, firing confusedly, had the horses cut from under them. They died kneeling in the street, fogging at the men rushing from every quarter.

Wyatt had hurled himself flat to escape being drilled in the crossfire. He got up slowly, putting on his hat, dusting himself. What now? Steps crunched behind, and a gun rammed him in the back.

"So you had the gall to come back, Wyatt?" a rancher's voice grated. "Many's the cow you stole off us! We'll make this cleanup complete by swingin' you from the corral gate!"

"Make him tell where that loot is first!" hollered another cowman, reaching a long arm to snatch Wyatt's six-shooter.

Cole felt a chill go over him. It was too late to fight or run. More men pushed around the side of the corral, cursing the outlaw who was a bigger prize than all of Moulton's gang put together. Wyatt's narrowed eyes flicked the hostile faces.

"Well, boys, it looks like you've got me. I had figured on helpin' rid your range of the last owlhooter, then maybe settlin' down here. But I guess my luck's run out. You'll find what's left of the money in my saddlebags at the McClains. I was parcelin' it out where I thought it'd do the most good. Crazy notion for an outlaw, wasn't it?"

They started dragging him toward the gateway, a red-necked puncher at his side twisting a hangman's knot in a rope. But suddenly the way was barred by the last people Cole wanted to face—Bill Wagram and June McClain. Leaving his forge to get into the fight, the young blacksmith had brought his sledge as well as his six-shooter. He raised the heavy hammer in a brawny arm.

"I'll brain the man who tries to put a rope on Cole Wyatt! Sure, I know what he did in the past, same as the rest of you. But he deserves a second chance. Except for him, the Moulton gang would still be ridin'."

The cowboy with the hangrope snapped, "Better watch out, Wagram, or we'll string you up beside Wyatt!"

June had Bill's gun, the hammer eared back. "Will you?" she shrilled. "Then three of us will hang in a row. But some of this mob won't be around to see it!"

While the crowd muttered, a horse was heard coming at a run. Eyes turned to observe Roddy Mason riding corralward, holding a heavy sack across his saddle. As he flung down, the sack hit the ground, bursting open and spilling rock fragments which glittered in the sun.

"Whatcha doin' to my friend Sawyer?" roared Mason. A stunned cowman, tearing his gaze from the heap of gold quartz, stammered an explanation.

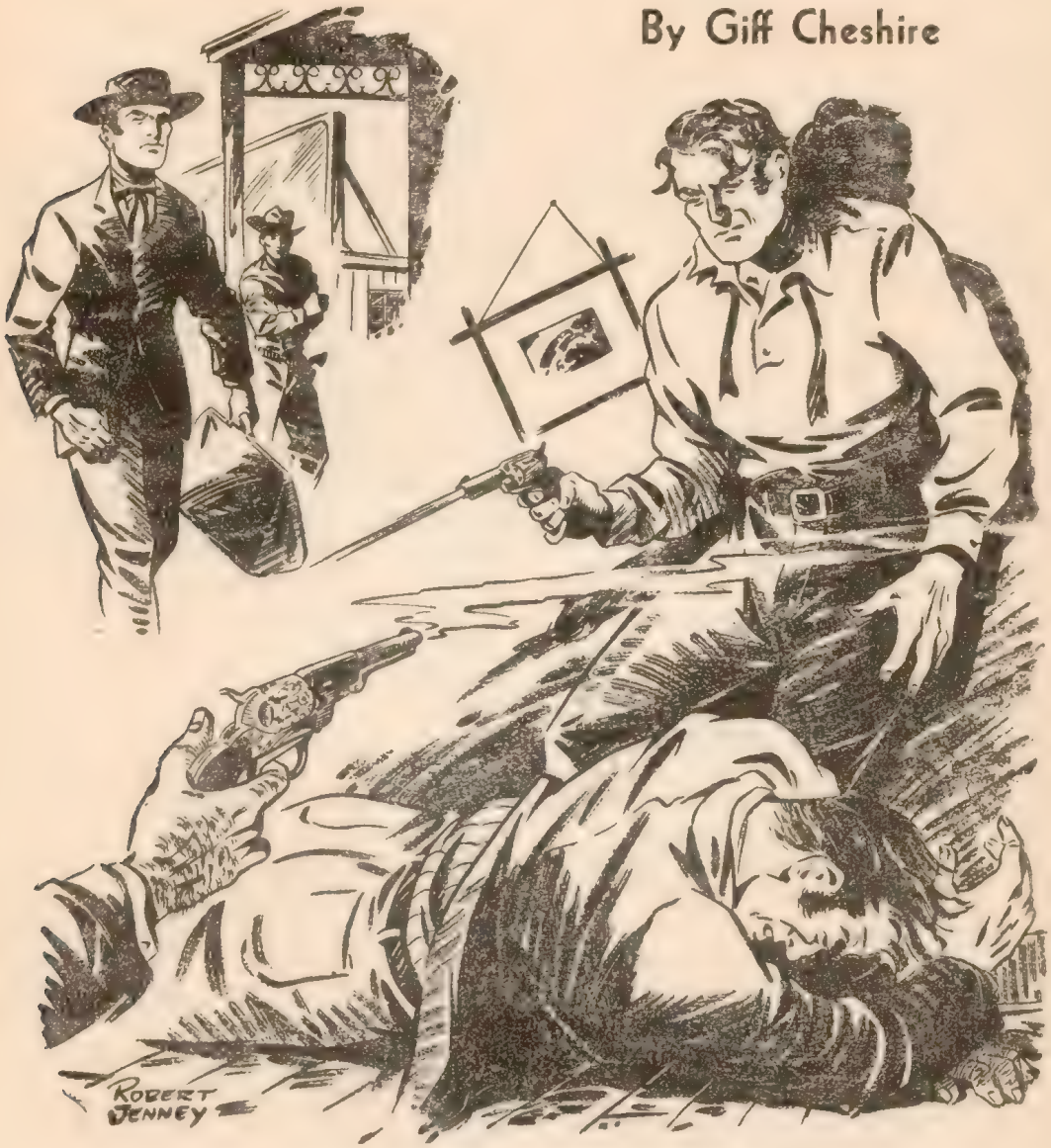
"Who cares if he's Cole Wyatt or Jesse James?" Mason screeched. "He staked this old donkey, when nobody else'd buy a pint of beans or a stick of dynamite, so that the gold in old Powderhorn finally come to light! There'll be a boom round here, with the stampeders flockin' in, such as you never dreamed of. And that man you're callin' an outlaw is responsible for it. Let loose of him!"

The hands that gripped Cole Wyatt fell away. Watching the men huddle crazily over Mason's heap of ore, he felt sure that the threat of the hangnoose was gone forever. He said, "Thanks, Roddy, just in time!" then switched his gaze to June and Bill. Both were wide-eyed, smiling. Next moment the girl's arms were around him as of old, her lips close to his ear because of the din around them.

"Like Roddy said, who cares what you were! It's what you are now that counts. Only, I'll have to call you Uncle Cole, won't I?"

New Notches for Old Guns

By Giff Cheshire



Dex Carmody rode into Pot Lick Flat raring to get himself a holster job from a gold-camp gambler. But after he met up with a sky pilot's pretty daughter he found himself gun guard of a gospel tent—passing out six-gun salvation.

THE kid wasn't looking for trouble when he rode the late afternoon stage into Pot Lick Flat. He was looking for Fitz McAdam and a gun job, admittedly, but there was nothing flashy nor offensive about young Dex Carmody. The city clothes he had got used to wearing in Frisco town looked a little out of place in the raw and rugged Oregon gold camp, and his hands, still stained from printer's ink, lacked the thick calluses of the pick-and-shovel brigade.

Dex picked up his carpet bag and headed down the camp's ragged street, his tall, tapered body showing the litheness of his twenty-two years. He knew it would not be hard to locate Fitz McAdam, for rumor had it that the gambler bossed not only this camp but half a dozen others in northern California and southern Oregon. McAdam would remember Ace Carmody and, as simple as that, Ace's son would have a job.

He had gone half the length of the first block when he halted abruptly. A girl had come out of a store and turned south ahead of him, going past a saloon. A big man in a checkered vest stood there, braced against the front on a stiffened arm. As the girl passed, he reached out and patted her shoulder. When she drew aside with a flashing look of anger, he pinched her cheek.

Dex dropped his bag and stepped forward. Steely fingers clamped on the man's shoulder as Dex pulled him around. A fist spat. The man staggered back against the wall. Instead of running, the girl stared at Dex. Instead of crumpling, the big ox of a man got his feet squarely under him and stared at Dex, too. He had fight in him, but not the brand Dex had offered. Rage boiled up in him and abruptly his hand streaked into his coat and came out with a gun.

Dex knew the man did not mean to kill him but only to heat his heels. Yet he moved in the split second in which he saw the man start his smooth draw and abruptly two guns were deadlocked. None of the several people watching could have said which had appeared first. None would venture to say which man was going to break it off.

The girl decided it. She walked boldly between the two menacing gun barrels. "You children put those toys away."

Dex slipped his gun back into the leather snugged in his left armpit. He grinned at the girl. "Would you let me walk you to wherever you're going? This camp seems a little rough."

She fell into step beside him and they moved on down the street, Dex turning his back disdainfully on the man who had shown the fight. Then the girl was saying, "It is a rough camp, and thanks. But I'm used to it. My name's Olive Talbot."

"Dex Carmody, ma'am. Got folks here?"

"My father." Olive's voice trailed off for a moment, then she said with something like eagerness, "Would you do me one more favor?"

"Why, of course, ma'am. Just name it."

Dex's heart was pumping at half again its normal speed. He had had little experience with girls, and nine out of ten of the ones you saw in the gold fields were there digging in their own pay dirt in their own way. Not this girl. Dex had seen that at first glance, which had prompted him to take a hand in it. Now it flattered him that she should ask him for further help in so tough a camp. In a way it proved his new conception of himself. They reached the edge of town, and Dex saw a big tent back in a thin stand of pine.

Olive Talbot stopped and offered her hand. "Thanks again, and be here at seven o'clock."

DEX went back up the street. He had two hours yet, leaving him time to get a room and the trail dust scrubbed off. He thought the girl had purposely failed to explain the favor she was asking, and something had kept him from crowding her for an explanation. He wondered what the tent was for. Medicine show, perhaps, or even a tent saloon.

He found a room at the opposite edge of town, cleaned up and donned a fresh shirt. He began to censure himself for getting interested in a girl the first thing. Girls had no part in the course he had set for himself two weeks ago. He had staged up through Sacramento, Tehama, Yreka, and Jacksonville for a grim purpose that he had less intention than ever of altering, now that he was on the spot. Fitz McAdam could always use a good gunman, and a man dedicated to such a job had no business thinking of laughing brown eyes.

Yet he decided to see what the girl wanted of him before he went to see McAdam, so as to be free of obligations when he did. He was aware that he would be

stepping outside what little law there was in the gold belt of the west coast when he went to work for Fitz McAdam. He had no doubt that McAdam would hire him. Fitz McAdam and Ace Carmody had been close friends.

Dex mused on the odd fact that his father had made friends of two men as diametrically opposite as Fitz McAdam and old Phil McClelland, the San Francisco editor. Ace Carmody had been a gentleman gambler, with the code of gentility bred in him and not worked in artificially. He made no secret of the fact that he was dishonest, at times, but never at cards or any other game of chance.

Grown up now, Dex knew that this odd duality of nature had been the link binding Ace Carmody to a ruthless adventurer like Fitz McAdam, on one hand, and a fiery, crusading newspaper editor like Phil McClelland, on the other. Yet Ace Carmody had been obliged to make a decision between the two when he got a bullet in his chest in a card game at Marysville. That had been five years before, when Dex was seventeen. Knowing that he was dying, Ace had sent Dex to Phil McClelland with a letter asking the vitriolic old editor to take care of Dex till he could stand on his own feet. Phil had accepted the responsibility as a matter of course.

Dex realized now that he had quickly felt a deep affection for the acid-tongued, fearless old man. It had lifted him out of the numb lostness of Ace's death. In time it had given his young life a purpose it had lacked with his father.

As he smoked in his Pot Lick Flat hotel room, waiting to keep his appointment with the girl, Dex's mouth twisted bitterly as he thought about it. He had come to believe the things old Phil preached through actions, rather than words. Phil called it decency and his creaky little weekly paper was dedicated to it, and he supported it without fear or favor. Without trying, as far as young Dex could detect, he had inculcated his beliefs in the plastic mind of the boy.

Phil had claimed that it gave a man strength and protection. Yet Phil McClelland had been killed by a Sidney Duck. Not by one of the powerful, sinister interests in the bay towns and gold camps that Phil had defied and bucked time and again. Not in a way that would have made his dying at least a tribute to his beliefs. One of the scum of the Gold Coast had stabbed Phil in the back one dark night for the gold ring on his finger and small change in his pocket, on one of the dark streets running under Telegraph Hill.

And now young Dex Carmody was going to his father's other friend, not as a boy needing help and protection, but as a grown man who had his eyes open, at last, looking for a man's job to do. Fitz McAdam did not believe that the forces of good would protect its servants. Perhaps he believed in nothing beyond gold dust and gunpowder and cold steel. Twice shocked to the roots of his being by the violent deaths of the men he had loved, Dex Carmody was ready to throw in with that belief. He didn't want ever to care about anybody again, for that only got a man hurt. He wanted a steady vision and a tough fiber, and he was going after them.

SHORTLY after six o'clock Dex sauntered forth, turning into a restaurant down the street for his supper. Though the place was busy, the counterman gave him a look of quick interest when he took his seat. Dex ordered baked beans and corn bread, with a mug of strong coffee, and by the time he was finishing it the customers on either side had left. The restaurant man paused in front of him, grinning.

"Mister, I saw you freeze Rufe Cade a while ago. That takes some doing."

Dex frowned. He had never been especially proud of his nimbleness with a hideaway gun. It had just been another of the things Ace Carmody had drilled him in to the point of perfection. Yet he saw that it had given him something of a reputation in this town already, just as it always had for Ace wherever they went.

"Who is this Cade?" asked Dex.

"One of Fitz McAdam's men. Tophand. Now Fitz'll either want to hire you or run you out of town." The counterman

yawned. "Going to the camp meeting?"

Dex stared. "Is that what that tent's for?"

The man grinned again. "Yeah, and it might be fun. This preaching feller, Cosmo Talbot, he's good. Fitz don't like having him here. I heard they mean to break it up tonight."

Dex's reaction was complicated. At first he was angry. So Olive Talbot had recognized a good gunman when she saw him and got her pretty clutches on him through the innocent guise of asking a favor! A gunman to defend a gospel tent —that was a hot one! Or maybe she just wanted him to pass out the hymn books. He swore under his breath as he paid for his meal and stepped out onto the street. It was almost time to go down there, and he was damned if he would go. Yet he had agreed to, and he headed down the street, telling himself that after this he would make a woman explain a favor before granting it.

Quite a crowd was gathering down there. Like all mining camps, Pot Lick Flat could triple in size when the miners came in from the countless side streams of the many now famous rivers. They bunched around the front of the tent. Dex's watch told him it was seven o'clock, and there was truculence in his eye as he pushed through the mob in front and stepped through the pinned-back opening of the big tent.

There were a few benches inside, but mostly nothing but scuffed hard earth for the men to sit on. There was a rough platform at the far end, though nothing resembling a pulpit. Then a flap at the back pushed open and Olive Talbot came in, followed by a big, gray-haired man. Olive's face brightened when she saw Dex striding toward her, and she smiled at him.

"Thanks for coming, Dex, and I'd like you to meet my father."

Dex shook hands with Cosmo Talbot, who resembled no sky-pilot he had ever seen. The man wore ordinary clothes, and there was strength in his seamy brown face and a twinkle in the deeply brown eyes as he shared with his daughter.

"Nice of you to come, Dex."

Dex broke gaze and looked at Olive, letting his annoyance show a little. "Now, what's the favor?" He saw Cosmo Talbot cast his daughter a sharp, questioning look, which she evaded.

"I'd just like to have you sit with me through Dad's lecture, Dex," said Olive Talbot.

The tent was beginning to fill. Mystified, Dex followed Olive, and she took place to one side of the rostrum. They could see most of the audience. Dex watched the benches fill, then the open spaces where men sat on the ground. The crowd hushed when Cosmo Talbot stepped onto the platform and began to speak.

Not to preach—that was the first thing Dex noticed. He simply talked, without benefit of hymn books or prayers, without even a Bible in evidence. It dawned on Dex gradually that he was talking the way old Phil McClelland used to talk through his paper. This man called it gospel, while Phil had called it decency, but Dex saw it was the same thing.

He did not offer salvation nor threaten hell-fire and damnation. He simply discoursed on the simple purposes behind ordinary men's very practical lives. He questioned how well they were fulfilling those purposes and little by little he began to question the wisdom of allowing fester spots to spread over the gold fields as they were being spread by certain selfish interests. He mentioned no names, but it became increasingly clearer that, here in Pot Lick Flat, he was talking about Fitz McAdam.

THE crowd had remained quiet to this point, with ninety-five per cent of the faces showing real interest. Now it grew restless, some of them resenting what Cosmo Talbot was saying, others recognizing it as dangerous talk. It was at this point that Dex remembered what the restaurant man had said about the likelihood of Fitz McAdam's breaking it up tonight.

It started from the outside, however, when men with knives slashed the ropes guying the tent. The canvas sagged in toward the big center pole, burying half of the audience. In the temporary panic

this caused, men planted inside started a wild free-for-all.

Dex Carmody, in the clear, was on his feet, not wanting any part of it. Olive Talbot grabbed his arm. "Please, Dex, stay close to Dad! It's happened before! They'll try to grab him!"

Dex scowled, but it was the favor he had promised her, and he was in for it. Cosmo Talbot crawled out from under limp canvas. His face was grave but he didn't look scared. This seemed to be one of the things his calling demanded of him, and in that moment he reminded Dex again of old Phil McClelland.

There was fighting everywhere. Men who had come with serious purpose to listen to Talbot fought those men who had been hired to run him out of town. Some of the former were pulling on the tent ropes again, straightening the big top. Then a man in a checkered vest stepped under the back wall and came toward Cosmo Talbot.

It was Rufe Cade, McAdam's man. Cade stared at Dex, frowning, and for a moment he seemed to reconsider his plans. At length he said, "Talbot, I reckon it'd be smart of you to pull out of town. Before morning." He heeled around and disappeared again.

There was a bitter smile on Olive's lips. "If you hadn't been here, they'd have beaten Dad horribly, Dex. I tricked you into a favor bigger than I had a right to ask, but that was why. Cade's scared of you. I saw it this afternoon."

Dex looked at her father. "You going to leave?"

"No."

"Then why didn't you whip him? You're big enough!"

There was a calm smile on Cosmo Talbot's lips. "I have a different kind of protection than my fists, Dex."

Because this was so exactly what Phil McClelland had maintained, Dex was instantly angered. And Phil had died at the hands of a slinking Sidney Duck! In a harsh voice, he demanded, "Is that all I can do for you, miss?" and when she said nothing he turned on his heel and left.

It occurred to him as he tramped up the long, uneven street that if he went to see Fitz McAdam right away he would probably draw the assignment of helping Rufe Cade run the preacher out of camp. He had money enough to keep himself for a time, and he decided to wait until the business was over before telling McAdam who he was and why he had come.

Fitz McAdam came to him. Dex was in his room, on the point of retiring, when somebody's boot beats failed to go on past his door. It wheeled open without a knock and McAdam came in, followed by Rufe Cade. There was no sign of recognition in McAdam's cold eyes, and Dex remembered that he had told his name to no one but Olive Talbot.

McAdam's manner was blunt. "Who are you, fellow, and what do you want here?"

Dex had risen and reached toward the chair where his gun harness hung when the door burst open. He stood there, his eyes searching McAdam's paunchy face. The man had aged in five years, the flesh of his face had sagged. Dex remembered that the same five years had altered himself considerably. Yet there was no point in concealing his identity.

"I'm Dex Carmody."

He watched recognition grow in the man's eyes, then McAdam exploded, "Ace's kid! Wouldn't you know it! But why've you been pulling my whiskers?"

Dex shrugged. "Didn't know I was, either time." There was no doubt about McAdam being glad to see him, yet for the first time Dex felt uncertain about wanting to go to work for him. Fitz McAdam wasn't just like Dex remembered him, with five years more of degeneration in his face and—yes, of lurking evil. Marks like that had a way of deepening on a man. He decided to cage awhile about what his business was here, what his plans were. "I meant to look you up before I left, Fitz. I been kind of taking me a look-see around this part of the country."

McADAM waved an impatient hand. "I read about old McClelland, and I know you're footloose. Why don't you come to work for me? Good wages—in fact, I'd treat you like my own son."

When Dex shook his head, not in refusal but as if in negative consideration, McAdam frowned a little. "Dex, I control this camp and half a dozen others. I get my cut on everything by furnishing protection. Like running this preacher out of town. You don't know what I'm offering you."

"What've you got against the preacher?"

McAdam grinned. "If he was an ordinary hell-fire-and-brimstone revivalist, I'd let him yell his lungs out. The camp'd listen to him and yell 'Hallelujah' and go right on with its sinning. This Cosmo Talbot's dangerous to us. The men not only think over what he says, but they've got a way of taking action on it. A half-dozen camps down the line got cleaned up after Cosmo'd been through. I don't want none of that in my territory."

"What'll you do if he don't run, like your man there warned him to?"

"Kill him. In a nice, innocent-looking way, of course." McAdam's eyes were on Dex closely. "So it's that girl you're thinking of! Listen, kid, we won't touch her. You can even stay out of camp till the business is over. She's young and pretty and yours, if you want her."

"You think she'd marry a hired gunman?"

"Why not? She may be Cosmo's kid, but buy her a lot of pretty clothes and let her splash a little money around Frisco and see if she asks you where you got it. I know women, kid." McAdam lighted a cigar. "What say, kid? Three hundred a month and a bonus cut ever' so often. My right-hand man. The crown prince."

A cold feeling was traveling along Dex's spine. "What if I decided to keep helping Cosmo Talbot?"

"Then we'd kill you."

"Even if my father was your friend?"

"Your father never bucked me, boy."

Dex Carmody had a moment of shattering bleakness. He knew McAdam would do what he threatened. McAdam backed his will with guns and tough, ruthless men. McAdam's logic told him that a friend athwart that will was no longer a friend but an enemy. Maybe Ace Carmody had suspected it, but his son had not. Dex had always remembered McAdam as one of his father's two real friends. Yet McAdam would kil him.

It struck Dex then that McAdam was afraid, or he cou.d tolerate opposition. Behind guns and hard-case henchmen he was still afraid. Because nothing could give a man absolute immunity from harm, nor from hurts such as Dex Carmody had known and tried to grow a shell against.

Dex saw then that neither Phil McClelland nor Cosmo Talbot had expected the power they served to give them utter protection. Yet they had not been afraid. He saw that such a faith would have rendered their beliefs small and cheap. It would have been a substitute for courage, a brave-maker like whisky.

"Wealth and a woman," McAdam repeated now. "Hell, if this one don't like your work, I can find you plenty who will. You've been bothering us, boy. We've got to thresh it out now."

There was a sense of freedom in Dex suddenly, a restless energy building up. McAdam had threatened to kill Cosmo Talbot if Talbot refused to run, and Talbot would not run for McAdam or any man. Which put it squarely up to Dex Carmody, who was a little more practical than Cosmo Talbot, who was equipped and willing to back his principles with a gun. Might be good or bad, depending on the ends it served. He was clear on that, suddenly, calm.

This was the kingpin in the setup Cosmo Talbot was bucking at present. In this room, Dex Carmody could do with a gun what Talbot might never achieve with talk, what he might die for trying to achieve. Dex still did not endorse Talbot's broad purposes here; he was thinking simply of the man's life and of Olive.

It took all kinds, visionaries to see things clearly and practical men to help with the details. He had heard old Phil say that countless times.

THEY would never let him out of this room alive if he refused the offer. The pair could make almost any kind of an excuse stick if McAdam thought it necessary to give an excuse in the camp be

so clearly dominated. There was no reluctance in Dex Carmody when he let his hand stab for the gun that still hung near. The fact that it was unexpected was offset by the fact that there were two against him, as good, maybe better.

It was Ace Carmody's gun, filed for fast action. Yet Rufe Cade's filled hand was streaking out from under his lapel as Dex brought it up. Dex shot the man, forgetting the slackening figure at once in the second's tenseness.

The loose fear came up in McAdam then, not driving him but setting the sagging evil of the man's face. McAdam was pressed against the wall, gun out, when Dex whirled. He yelled, "Dex, wait!" then triggered, and Dex realized it had been a callous trick to upset his timing. Dex fired in the same instant in which a strange rigidity ran over him. He was kicked half around and dropped across the chair. For a moment his head, as he tried to shove himself up, seemed weighted with lead, and blackness started behind his lower eyelids and tried to crawl across his eyes. He expected death, but it didn't come.

He had managed to get to his knees when he heard boots pounding across the lower floor of the hotel and in the hall beyond his door. It dawned on him then that both Cade and McAdam were wholly still. The whole thing had transpired in a matter of seconds. The alarmed hotel was just now responding.

Dex climbed to his feet and felt blood run down his left arm. He flung open the door, not knowing if it would reveal friend or foe. The armed men who waited there seemed to have the same wonder, with guns in their fists and a question in their eyes. Yet when they recognized Dex there was a show of friendliness instead of animosity.

A man breathed, "He got McAdam and Cade both!"

It was late the next morning when Dex walked out to the Talbot camp at the edge of town. He saw that friendly miners had put the big tent shipshape again. The Talbots must know by now what had erupted in town during the night. Dex knew that Cosmo Talbot was not going to approve of the way he had taken to remove the evil from this camp, to restore decency and peace. He had killed, and now Dex saw what he had failed to see the night before. Olive might not like it, either, might have no wish to marry a man who could file notches on his gun if he chose.

He could plead self-defense, which it had been in a sense, yet he had no wish to dodge the issue. Rare was the man who could wear another's hat, and he had no intention of trying. He told them all about it, his reason for coming here, and why he had changed his mind. That was the way he was, and he could adopt nothing else.

He found Cosmo Talbot as practical now as he had been in his talk the night before. "Rest easy, son. I'd resort to a gun myself to save another man's life."

Dex smiled. "Sir, I'm going on up into Oregon. I'd like to have me a little place to farm. I'd like to have you come along. I mean you and Olive—" He broke off and blushed.

"You mean Olive." Cosmo Talbot chuckled and looked at his daughter, whose eyes were shining. "No, Dex, I've still got work to do. Some day, though, I'll be along. Meanwhile, I'd like to have Olive out of this. I trust her to you, boy. That is, if she's interested."

"Interested? Oh, Dad!"

Dex grinned as their eyes met, something leaping between them. "Sir, I guess you've got a little job to do, then the missus and I'll go hunt us up some saddle horses."

Death Reaps a

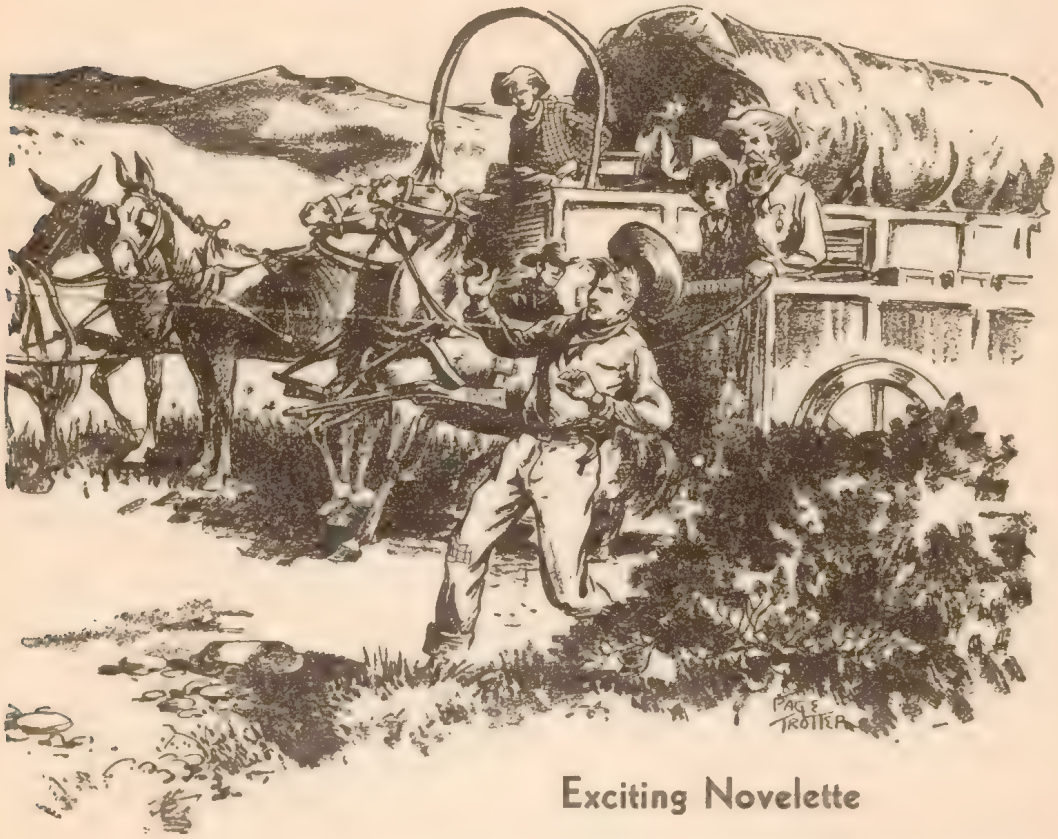
By D. B. Newton

CHAPTER I

THIS was orchard country, and though Rod Cameron was a stockman, he could appreciate the richness of it. Forking saddle along a wagon road that threaded Spartan River valley southward from the Columbia gorge, he had passed mile after mile of apple trees loaded with ripe fruit, and the pickers busy among the orderly rows. A clear-water stream flowed swiftly in the valley's throat, and beyond the tawny, rounded slopes at Cameron's right, timbered ridges of the Cascade foothills arose, with Mount Hood's snowy crest dominating the brilliant autumn sky.

A smiling land—and the rumors he had picked up around the dealers' sheds at Hood River seemed disturbingly foreign to its atmosphere. Cameron was beginning to wonder now if what had promised to be a more or

Holster Harvest



Exciting Novelette

Syndicate representative Rod Cameron rode into Spartan River valley to check the orchard situation. But instead of gathering confidence and co-operation, Cameron sowed seeds of suspicion among the fruit growers and reaped a hot-lead harvest from members of his own outfit.

less routine matter of checking and filing a report might not develop certain angles before he was finished here.

The head of the valley, as he approached it, began to narrow. Sometimes the lava substructure underlying all this fertile soil cut through in stretches of rough and broken terrain, where the tumbling creek was touched with feathers of white water, and the orchards were more sparsely located. It was at one of these lonely places that Cameron took a twist in the trail around a pile of lava rock and suddenly slowed his bronc.

Two wagons were drawn up in the road, side by side, facing in his direction. One was an ordinary farm wagon, the other a large freight rig drawn by a six-mule team. As Cameron came nearer, he saw men transferring crates of apples from the small wagon to the larger one. In itself, this looked

all right. But Cameron's keen blue eye hardened all at once when he noticed that the men hoisting those boxes were masked!

Hijackers! Though this was none of his concern, he found himself reaching quickly for a holstered six-gun, and already spurred heels were ramming home. The roan gelding he'd rented at the livery in Hood River went plunging forward with a spurt of hoof-raised dust.

Coming in closer, he made out more details. There were four of the hijackers—two doing the loading, one half visible on the seat of the big freight rig, another down in the road with gun metal winking in his hand as he kept it trained on the two occupants of the smaller wagon. One of these was an elderly man, with white mustache and thin features; the other, a woman in poke bonnet and gingham dress. So much Rod Cameron took in as he swept in on that scene.

Then a rifle lashed. A steel-jacket bullet sang angrily past Rod's cheek and by reflex he jerked reins, dragging the roan onto its haunches. He saw the fifth masked man then, a lookout posted yards ahead along the road and almost unseen in the shadow of a huge clump of sagebrush. He had a rifle at his shoulder, smoke feathering from its barrel, and he yelled at Cameron:

"Turn around! Keep out of this!"

For answer Cameron swung down with his six-gun and squeezed trigger just as the rifle spoke again. The two shots blended and the lookout stumbled backward, crashing into the sage, rifle dropping from a riddled arm.

ALREADY Cameron was driving ahead as the holdups, warned by this shooting, whirled. A crate splintered, hitting the edge of the wagon box and crashed to the road with a bright spill of ruddy apples as the two loaders dug for weapons. The man in the dust wheeled away from his prisoners, and his gun muzzle tipped with flame. Cameron triggered at him, missed. The old man on the wagon seat, seeing his chance, had dropped his arms now and was leaning to grope underneath, probably trying to locate a weapon of his own.

A bullet from Cameron's six-shooter scorched between the pair of heavy-shouldered loaders and those two split apart, diving off the wagon for cover. He was lining for another try at the man down by the front wheel when a solid blow struck him somewhere, and he heard the report of the gun at the same instant.

Must have been the other man, in the shadowed seat of the freight rig, who got him. Cameron sensed this dimly even as he was grabbing for saddle horn, trying to stick and lift his six-gun for another shot. But his groping fingers closed on nothing and then the bronc was going out from under him. Almost under the hoofs of the freight rig's frightened mules, he hit the hard earth; he hit with a force that stunned, that knocked the sense from him. Grappling for strength, fighting to stay in this thing that he had so brazenly tackled against such odds, he felt blackness and pain sweep across him, and then, suddenly, there was nothing at all. . . .

A voice said, "He's game, all right—nearly getting himself killed like that trying to help total strangers. I'm mighty glad he was no worse hurt—"

Cameron had been lying in a half-waking state, listening to the hum of talk around him and testing the severity of the pain that throbbed somewhere in his consciousness. He decided now it was his head that hurt the worst, in a dull pounding ache. As the pain localized itself and the strength seemed to be coming back into him, he opened his eyes and blinked at the stab of bright daylight.

He lay on a rough bench on the porch of a building, a pillow under his head and the westering sun slanting in at him beneath the veranda

roof. A slight dizziness in things spun itself out, as he heard the same voice exclaim:

"Ah—good enough! He's coming around!"

Cameron, blinking at the speaker's silhouette against the sky, recognized the oldish fellow from the holdup. There was a gray-haired woman with a basin of water in her hands and a towel across one arm. And then Cameron turned his head and saw the girl in gingham kneeling close beside him, poke bonnet hanging down her back, the breeze across the porch lifting the ends of brown curls. He saw that she was pretty, and troubled.

"Well, hello!" said Cameron, and grinned painfully. Lifting spurred boots off the couch, he sat up, despite a hand the girl put against his shoulder as though to prevent him. His strength was returning rapidly. He felt and found the bandage covering a portion of his head. The hijacker's bullet must have just grazed his scalp, knocking him unconscious and putting him out of action at the moment when he was needed most.

For the farm wagon stood before the door, the team still hitched to it and Cameron's bronc tied to the tailgate. And its box empty!

ROD CAMERON swung his eyes to meet those of the old man by the railing. "They got away with your load, then?"

The other nodded, his face somber. "We appreciate your trying to stop them," he said quietly, and his voice held a note of despair. "But that gang was too many for one man to buck. Looks like it's too many for the honest growers in Spartan Valley!"

"Does this sort of thing happen often?"

"Four times in the past month! It's always worked the same way on that lonely stretch of road, by a half-dozen masked toughs who transfer the crates to their freight rig. After that's done, one stays behind and holds a gun on the owners until the hijacked load gets a good start on the way to Hood River."

Rod frowned. "Can't you organize to stop this?"

"What are we to do? There aren't many of us, and we can't afford to hire gunfighters. Most of us are about broke, after the price-cutting war that's been draining us dry for the past three years. Much more of this, and—" He caught himself. "But it does no good, running on about my troubles. We haven't even introduced ourselves. I'm Stephen James. This is my wife, and my daughter Susan."

The girl was standing beside her father now. It was she who had been on the wagon seat with him during the holdup, and Cameron knew a sudden horror as he thought how this lovely person might have been hurt by a wildly thrown bullet.

He came to his feet quickly, nodding respectfully to the women. As he reached to shake hands with James, he announced: "Cameron's my name—district representative for the Western Development Association—"

He saw the expressions freeze on those three faces, saw hostility harden in the old man's eyes as he jerked back the hand he had offered. Cameron stiffened, letting his own arm drop, puzzlement in him. He heard Stephen James say tightly:

"I once said I'd shoot Clint Decker, or any other syndicate man that so much as set foot in my orchard. I can't do that because I'm beholden to you, but—"

"Just a minute," snapped Cameron, his own lean face gone hard. "What's wrong with Decker and Western Development?"

Instead of answering his question, James only grunted, "I think we've talked enough! There's nothing more to say."

"Wait, Dad!" Susan James took her father's arm. "There must be some mistake. He tried to help us!"

The old man shook his head grimly.

"That's something I haven't figured out yet, but I will! Because there's no good in any syndicate man. There can't be, or he wouldn't be working for that price-cutting, hijacking outfit of Eastern crooks—"

"I guess you were right at that, Mr. James," Rod Cameron cut in then, sharply. "We have said about all we need to. I'll be getting off your land at once." He saw his flat-topped, wide-brimmed stockman's hat on the bench and picked it up. He turned to the girl. "Thank you, miss —and you, too, Mrs. James—for fixing up that bullet streak in my scalp; you did a right nice job." He carefully drew the hat on over the bandage. Then he turned and left the three of them, went down the steps with a jingle of spur chains and to his rented livery bronc.

Jerking loose the reins tying the horse to the wagon tailgate, Cameron found stirrup and swung up. Stephen James still stood at the railing, watching in stony silence. His wife appeared thunderstruck, and Cameron saw troubled doubt in Susan's pretty face.

Briefly, Cameron touched his hat-brim, said, "Good day!" and turned his gelding into the trail leading across the valley floor, away from the little house. Without a backward glance he rode between long rows of apple trees, that showed the heavy burden of fruit among their leaves as they stretched lengthy shadows across the ground.

CHAPTER II

WHERE the wagon ruts met the valley road, there was a gate that Cameron opened, leaning from saddle, and closed again behind him. He sat there for some minutes, having his thoughts about that scene at the James place.

It confirmed in part what he had heard in casual inquiries around the apple sheds at Hood River—talk of a price war being waged between Western Development's Clint Decker and the smaller, private operators of the valley. Rod Cameron frowned darkly. Maybe it was a good thing the syndicate had called him from the horse ranch he managed for them, up in Montana, to take a jaunt down to this Oregon orchard country and check on Decker's request for more funds.

Moreover, Stephen James had gone so far as to connect Western Development with the valley's recent outbreak of hijacking—a serious charge, indeed. It might be that Cameron would have to dig clear to the bottom of that grim business, before his job here was finished.

He squinted at the sun, dipping toward Mount Hood's dazzling crown and the pine-tipped foothills that cut jaggedly into the intense blue of Oregon's autumn sky. Still time for a little investigating. Cameron put his bronc into the wagon trail and headed quickly down-valley.

Sooner than he expected he came again to the scene of the holdup, and he reigned in here for a close look at the tracks in the road. The robberies always occurred at about this same spot, James had said, and Rod's trained eye could easily trace the method of operation. Back in a pine clump was where they held the big freight rig, while waiting for the victim to appear along the road below. Then the wagon was driven down and the transfer of the load accomplished in short time.

This road was not much traveled, except by orchard wagons on the way to Hood River markets. A single guard placed at either side—like the one that threw rifle lead at Cameron this afternoon—could keep a lookout for passers-by.

Cameron computed the distance to Hood River, and the time elapsed since the holdup. The rig with its stolen cargo would reach the Columbia River town sometime in the night, and there the hijackers no doubt had arrangements with some

unscrupulous dealer to dispose of the contraband without fuss or delay. As the crates would bear the James labels, an illegal channel had to exist for dumping them onto the market.

There was no doubt of tracking the big freight wagon to its place of origin, for the drab lava rock cropped out here all about the rutted road, and tracks were soon lost. He could tell the hijackers had used a saddle horse, in addition to the rig and mules. That would be for the one who remained behind, keeping a gun on the victims until the others had had a good headstart in making away with their stolen cargo.

Well, he could accomplish no more here. He turned up-valley again, passed the James gate, and presently came to a wide place in the road where there was a settlement of two or three roadside buildings. The largest was a combination store and saloon, which also had sleeping rooms to rent on the second story. Here Cameron, unsure of his bearings, reined in long enough to ask some questions of a loiterer on the deep veranda, and the man gave directions for reaching the W-D orchards, a few miles farther up the swift, cold-water stream.

Cameron found the side road, and the sign bearing the name of the syndicate and Clint Decker's name as orchard manager. Cameron turned in here, and very soon the way began to climb.

UNLIKE the other orchards of the Spartan River country, this one was laid not in the valley bottoms but along the rise of the western slope. Upon its crest the syndicate, Cameron knew, had found the choicer bottom lands already taken. But these trees on the lower fringe at least were prime growth and the fruit he saw lacked nothing as to size and color. Of course there would be a short growing season on the ridges, and the pickers must have largely finished their work, in order to beat out the first frosts and snows.

In a clear space about halfway up the steep, he came out of the even rows of trees suddenly and caught sight of a cluster of buildings. It was a much bigger layout than the James family owned. A central, one-story building seemed to contain living quarters and an office, and beside it was a long, narrow, open-sided shed that was the heart of busy activity.

Nearly a dozen men were at work here, and everywhere were tubs and bushels of ripe, red apples. At long tables, sorters were picking over the fruit and packing it into crates. Other men nailed on the lids, piled the boxes high. Near by a tarp-covered wagon waited to be loaded. The crisp autumn air held the sweet, winy scent of the ripe fruit, and the tang of smoke from a big bonfire beyond the shed mingled with it.

This was a world foreign to Rod Cameron, but he liked it. He was swinging down from saddle when the office door opened, and a man came out upon the steps. He looked at Cameron quizzically.

"What can I do for you?"

When the newcomer identified himself, this man immediately came forward with hand outstretched. "We been expecting you!" he exclaimed. "Come inside. I'm Decker."

He was a stocky, black-haired man, inches short of Rod's six feet. He seemed genial enough as he escorted his visitor into the office which was rather crudely furnished with pine slab tables and chairs. As he talked, the W-D's manager brought out bottles and glasses, poured a drink for them both. Cameron, settled in one of the homemade chairs, sipped his whisky and took a look around him.

To judge by this office and by what he had seen out there in the shed, Decker was anything but extravagant in his methods of operation. He seemed to be one who cut corners, and that was a good sign. On the face of it, his request for additional op-

erating funds should deserve careful consideration.

Very quickly, Decker came to this subject. "I wrote the Eastern offices full details of the expenditures I hope to make. For one thing, we need new sheds and wagons, and the wagon trail down to the main valley road will have to be regarded after another winter—it's getting in pretty bad shape. That's part of the picture. Another drink?"

"No, thanks." Cameron settled back in his chair, listening to the other's talk. The sounds of the establishment came through the open square of a window that framed a vista of apple trees and blue sky and distant timber.

"Then, next spring," Clint Decker continued, "I want to put in some more acreage. This orchard, as you may know, was something of an experiment. The men already in operation in Spartan River valley were quite sure, when I started setting out trees on these hills twelve years ago, that I could never make them grow. But as you can see for yourself, they were mistaken. We've got considerable more ridge land that could profitably go under cultivation now, and I've got figures from nurseries to indicate the probable cost of doing this."

AFTER a moment Rod Cameron said: "It doesn't sound as though you intended starting any of these projects before the end of winter."

"No, I don't. Frankly I was surprised to learn, a few weeks ago, that Western Development was sending a man out at this time to discuss them. All I had done was file a preliminary request, so I could estimate how many of my plans I might be able to count on carrying out, come spring."

"Well, since I'm here, I'll take a look at those nursery bids and anything else that enters into the picture, and make my report." Rod Cameron got to his feet, picking up his hat. Decker also rose from behind the desk. "It's quitting time now," Cameron said, "but I'll be out first thing in the morning and we'll go over the whole proposition." He hesitated, his glance settling levelly on the other's dark face. "There are a couple of other matters that have to be ironed out, too."

The man's face was suddenly unreadable. "Yes?"

"I heard some pretty harsh things said about the syndicate today. I heard it accused of price cutting, even of hijacking—"

"That's talk!" snorted Clint Decker. "Certainly I've been cutting prices, because the rest of the operators in this valley had combined to keep the market ridiculously high. All I've done is show them that by watching costs you can take a reasonable price and still see profits. As for hijacking—" he made a face—"no one has bothered my shipments. I'm not sure at all there's anything in the stories!"

"No?" Cameron lifted a hand, briefly, and touched the bandage covering the side of his scalp. "I'm pretty well convinced of it because it so happens I tangled with those crooks this very afternoon, at close quarters, and nearly got my needings." He shrugged then, drew on the hat. "But this can wait until later. And you understand, I'm not making any accusations. That's not what I'm here for."

A faint truculence in Decker's manner disappeared quickly, and once more he was smiling. "Of course. Neither of us likes the kind of talk about the syndicate that's going the rounds. I'd like to see a stop to it." He added, "Sorry I can't put you up here for the night—got a full crew working now, you see—"

"Sure. There was a place at the crossroads settlement down below looked like it had comfortable sleeping rooms." He held out a hand. "See you tomorrow, then."

It was close to six o'clock, and the orchard hands were knocking off

work. Cameron, lifting into saddle, took the downward trail through the rows of apple trees, and he was frowning. Hard to tell the straight of anything yet, with all these charges and countercharges. Yet what he had seen of Decker so far made the man appear intrinsically honest.

Evening shadows were gathering under the fruit trees, and in the west a few clouds were beginning to take on sunset colors. Jogging down toward the valley road, Cameron passed a W-D freight wagon maneuvering the ruts of this switchback wagon track, the wheels jouncing in the many holes. It needed repair, all right, just as Decker had pointed out. Cameron's brows dragged down below the wide hatbrim. Everybody concerned in this affair seemed to be telling the truth. But that didn't still the nagging hunch that somewhere someone was lying!

CHAPTER III

THERE was no stable, but the combination hotel and store at the settlement had a corral in back and a supply of grain. Rod Cameron turned his gelding into that, hung up the sweaty blanket and the saddle, and then went around through gathering dusk toward the front of the building.

Two doors opened on the veranda, from the store and from the barren lobby where a flight of stairs led above to the half-dozen sleeping rooms. Lamps were already burning in the windows, though some gray light remained in the day, and angry purple streaked the western sky above the jagged pinetops. Rod went up the broad veranda steps, turning to the lobby entrance, and then he halted abruptly as he noticed for the first time the figure half seen against a lighted window. He recognized it at once, and said, "Miss James!"

"You?" She drew a little out of the shadows, so that he could see her figure silhouetted plainly. The girl had a shawl about her, for a fall chill was coming sharply with the end of day.

He was about to move past her when she spoke his name. Rod turned and went to stand tall before her slender form.

"I'm sorry about this afternoon," she said hesitantly. "Father shouldn't have lost his temper."

He smiled briefly, and lamplight from the window picked out the blunt angles of his dark face. "I can understand the strained feelings there are hereabouts. But I hope we can all be on friendly terms, in spite of my connection with the syndicate you people seem to hate." He added, "Your father appears to hold Western Development responsible for those hijackings. Can he believe it after seeing a syndicate man tackle those crooks and nearly get a bullet through the head?"

"But it fits in," she insisted doggedly. "Since the syndicate orchard began producing, three years ago, we've had nothing but trouble—a constant fight to keep from being squeezed out by price cutting, and now by even more ruthless tactics!"

Rod Cameron frowned. He decided not to repeat Decker's countercharge about the private fruit growers combining to keep the market high. Instead, he pointed out: "You hint, maybe, that Decker can cut prices because he has hired hoodlums to steal your produce for him to dump on the market. But I understood, from what your father told me, these hijackers began but a short time ago. Doesn't it seem reasonable to you that the robberies are the work of some outside gang?"

She faced him squarely. "You may be right, Mr. Cameron, but you're wasting breath trying to whitewash the syndicate! Look at this place—" She made a gesture to include the handful of buildings of the settlement. "There should be a town here; because of the price war the people of the valley can't support one! We

can't even afford a school for the children that need it. That's what the syndicate has done for Spartan River!"

He was silent a long moment. "Up in Montana," he said finally, "where I manage a horse ranch for Western Development whenever I'm not out troubleshooting, they needed a school. The syndicate built one and paid the teacher's salary until the folks with kids to send could arrange among themselves to meet expenses! The people I work for aren't out to exploit this country, Miss James, but to develop it—just as the name of the association indicates. If that weren't true, I assure you I'd be finding myself another job!"

SUSAN made no answer to that, but Rod could see that she was considering it thoughtfully. He gave her a moment to ponder what he had said, while his glance wandered to the lighted window behind her. Inside the lobby, seated in cane-bottom rockers beside a table that held the glowing lamp, Stephen James and another man were holding serious talk. Cameron looked the stranger over. He was a lean black-garbed character, with a hollow-cheeked, cadaverous look about him.

Rod asked, "Who's that with your father?"

"Orin Tallant," she told him. "He's staying here at the hotel, looking for orchard property for sale. If he would only make the right offer, I—I almost think Dad would talk business. Dad's getting pretty desperate, I'm afraid. Our credit is about gone, and if we lose any more shipments, it will about break us."

Later, in his room on the second floor, Rod Cameron thought about that talk with the girl. He wondered if his arguments had made any impression. He had to vindicate his employers in the eyes of these people, and somehow overcome their hatred. Moreover, if Clint Decker were resorting to unfair practices, that would have to be stopped. And the weight of the whole tangled mess lay squarely on Cameron's shoulders.

He washed the travel stains from him in a porcelain basin on the dresser of his dingy room, then went across the road to an eat shack for supper. It was full dark when he had finished eating and returned to the hotel. A cold wind had come with the night, bringing the scent of snow with it. The moon in a cloudless sky glinted frostily from Mount Hood's icy slopes and laid dark shadows around the few scattered buildings of the settlement. There was almost no sound except for the wind and the tumbling river.

Entering the hotel, Rod Cameron was about to cross to the stairs and go up to his room when he remembered that he was out of tobacco. A swinging door connected the lobby with the store next to it, and he turned and shoved through this. The place was small, with the usual stacks of canned goods and a single counter that did double duty as a bar. As Rod entered, two customers were leaning there, casually drinking.

What he felt then was not exactly recognition, but it was a strong sense of familiarity in these men. He went to the counter, made his purchese, and loitered a moment building a smoke as he considered. They were big men, bulky and hard-muscled, with six-shooters on their hips and a similarity of build and feature that suggested they might be brothers. He didn't think he had ever seen their faces before, however. . . . Then he had it!

Masked or not, if these weren't two of the hijacking crew he had tangled with this afternoon—the two he had seen atop the wagons as they swung the heavy crates into the freighting rig—then a sharply observant eye and a keen memory had played him false altogether.

Any doubt was dispelled for him a moment later when one of the pair turned from his drink and flicked

a look at the stranger. What started as a casual glance turned to something utterly different, and as his eye hardened, the man stiffened noticeably, and one hand jerked inches nearer to the holster at his broad thigh. Only for a second; but though he turned away then, reaching for a half-filled glass, the veil had been dropped long enough for Cameron to know that he had guessed right and, moreover, that this tough had paired his recognition.

DELIBERATELY, he rolled his cigarette and shoved it between flat lips. He saw the one who had spotted him give his partner a nudge and jerk his head briefly in Cameron's direction, and then the second man had a look, and his face went hard and scowling. Their idle talk chopped off abruptly, and their drinks stood on the counter forgotten.

The bald-headed storekeeper apparently had noticed nothing, but it seemed to Rod that the smoky air of the little room had drawn taut, in a tightness which might quickly break into gunplay. The moment shattered, though, as the outside door was jerked suddenly open, and Orin Tallant stood there in the draft of chill night air that swirled across the threshold.

Sound of the door opening brought the tough pair around and as their eyes met Tallant's, the gaunt-faced man made a quick motion with his head—almost unnoticeable but real. It was a summons. For then he turned and melted back into the darkness, leaving the door open. Shortly afterward the pair finished off their drinks and with studied casualness turned and rolled their spurs across the splintered floor. Just before they went out, one halted uncertainly as he threw a suspicious, cold-eyed stare back at the stranger by the counter. Then he shrugged and followed his partner.

They left Cameron eyeing the empty doorway, strange thoughts taking shape within him. Tallant—a man showing up from nowhere with a stuffed money belt and in the market for orchard lands. And two hard-case gents who he was morally certain had been in the crew that hijacked the James shipment.

Even as he considered the possible implications of this, Rod Cameron's long legs were moving him quickly forward, toward the door where the dangerous trio had vanished.

He slipped into the night soundlessly, waited a moment in the blackness under the veranda roof as he listened. A snatch of talk came to him, broken off almost before he could place its direction and locate the three. They were gathered near the corner of the building, in the shadow of the eaves. "It's to be sometime tomorrow morning—early. . ." As the words faded the three figures were melting into the darkness, and the tramp of their feet came muffled in dust as they moved back along the side of the store.

At once Cameron was down the veranda steps and rounding the edge of the porch, at a quick and soundless prowl, the gun from his holster snaking into his hand. As he reached the corner of the building, he hauled up briefly and pressed lean shoulders against the rough wall as he listened.

There were moonlight and sharply outlined shadows, and the yellow splash of lampglow from a window beside him. Yonder the corral made a black-barred pattern, and the three were headed for this. Cameron could see them a moment as the moonlight hit them, before they were lost into shadow again.

He moved forward, crossed the window brightness and kept on. But suddenly he had to pull back against the dark wall again, for up ahead those footsteps had halted abruptly. He waited, motionless, wondering if the three had guessed they were followed. Then he got his answer in the form of a curse, and a burst of gunflame lancing out of the shadows.

At once his own six-gun rocked up and he hit trigger, aiming at the muzzle flash, and after that he was diving sideward. A choked cry answered his shot. There was a third report, lead clapping into the dry boards of the wall where Cameron had stood an instant before. He stumbled in the dark, went down rolling. When he could get up to hands and knees again, doors were slamming, voices shouting somewhere. And the three ahead were running.

CHAPTER IV

CAMERON, getting his feet under him, plunged on recklessly. But apparently with a crowd forming, the others didn't care to wait for a fight. They had horses saddled and tied to the corral fence, Rod saw now, and already were swinging up and slapping spurs. He triggered another shot that was answered by one flung wildly from saddle. And then, because there was nothing else to do, he hauled up and stood there hearing the hoofbeats fade into the night. He thought of his own bronc in the pen, but pursuit would be hopeless.

He knew now that the man named Tallant was deeply mixed into this, and also that the hijackers had Rod Cameron spotted this time, and the shooting had only begun.

Nevertheless, what a moment ago had seemed the answer to this hijack question—namely, an effort by Orin Tallant, working on his own, to squeeze hard-pressed growers into selling out to him at low figures—was clearly not a satisfactory explanation after all. For there were nagging doubts at the back of his mind—something vague—something about hoofprints in the dust, and the distance to Hood River. . .

It was hell to have things moving rapidly toward showdown, and still be entirely and confusedly in the dark as to the shape of this thing he was bucking!

That night, however, as he slept, his subconscious mind must have been busy with the problem. For when in the morning he woke on the hard cot in his room and lay for a moment, once more going over the puzzle, the disparate pieces suddenly fell together for him, all at once gave him a new and startling answer.

The clue to this was something he had seen last evening, and hardly noticed, while jogging down the wagon track from Decker's place. And while there were still holes in the theory, he knew with sudden breathless certainty it was the only one that would cover all the confusing medley of facts.

He dressed quickly, was finishing a hurried job of shaving when a knock came at the door of his room. Glance narrowing, Cameron put down his razor and toweled his face. He got the gunbelt from a chair back and buckled it on before stepping to the door and shoving back the latch. His hand fell away from gun butt as the door swung wide and he saw his visitors—Stephen James and two other worried-looking men who were obviously fruit growers like himself.

Cameron stepped back, waiting as they filed in. It was James who spoke first. "My daughter's been talking to us," he blurted. "She told us some things you said to her last night and got us thinking maybe we ought to make a try to get along." He added, after a pause, "Hear you got into a shooting with those no-good Garth brothers."

Cameron nodded shortly. He had kept his mouth shut about the affair, except to ask about those two toughs. Dirk and Ed Garth were their names, and they were hangers-on with no particular business in the Spartan River country.

He changed the subject now. "Mr. James," he asked, "how soon after Clint Decker came here and started

operations did your trouble with Western Development start?"

The other frowned, remembering. "It was a long time—as long as it took for the trees to start producing. I recall we wondered when the damned Eastern fools would learn the stupidity of trying to start an orchard on those hills. You see, there's a substructure of lava under all this soil, and the way it crops out on the high slopes I'd have sworn that it was too near the surface up there for an apple tree ever to grow. But we were fooled. Decker planted good, young trees, and right away they took root, and within ten years they were giving bumper harvests. That's when he started chiseling!"

"Are you sure," Cameron suggested, wording his question carefully, "that Decker's lower prices might not be due to cutting corners, to holding down on operating costs, to accepting smaller profits?"

"If he says that, he's a liar!" retorted James. "You've seen our orchards, Mr. Cameron. We've had no capital in back of us. Every one of us started from scratch, and our returns have always been small. We were certainly never getting rich, not even before Clint Decker came!"

ALL at once, Rod Cameron knew this man was telling the truth, and that Decker had lied. Moreover, he had the answer to the last big question now. He knew the motive behind this whole setup.

"Mr. James," he said, "you men, and the syndicate as well, have been the victims of a colossal swindle! But it's going to be stopped—now!" Rod already had his hat in hand, the need for action riding him. But something else must not be forgotten. He demanded quickly, "Do you happen to know if any of the growers plan to take a load in to Hood River today? Sometime this morning, it would be."

They exchanged glances. One of the men snapped, "Tom Weatherall

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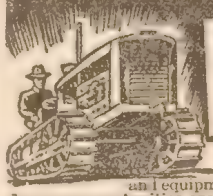

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was aiming to keep that a secret!"

"I think your fine friend Orin Tallant wormed it out of him, because the hijack crew has got it pegged!"

"Tallant?" cried James. "So he's the leak!"

Cameron said, "Maybe, if you hurry and round up a crowd—"

"By hell, we will!" The old man added, "How about putting in with us? We could use that six-gun of yours."

The other hesitated, then shook his head. "No. You can handle this. There's another job waiting up at Decker's—and I have to be riding! . . ."

Everything about W-D headquarters looked just the same as yesterday—the long shed, the workers, the sorters busy at the tables culling and packing the ripe fruit. Just like yesterday, the office door opened as Rod Cameron rode up and Clint Decker himself came out upon the steps. He made a pleasant greeting, stood waiting as his visitor dismounted leaving reins trailing, and went up the steps past him. Decker would not know that the whole picture had changed now—that his game had been found out, and this was showdown.

Then Cameron saw the three waiting for him inside the office—gaunt Orin Tallant, and the hard-case Garth brothers. At the same moment the ramming of a gun muzzle against his back told him the picture had changed more than he supposed!

"Step right in!" purred Decker, and the gun bored harder against him. There was a tug at his holster as the six-shooter was slid from it. Facial muscles tightening, Rod went ahead of Decker, and the latter closed the door.

"This is the man, isn't it?" Clint Decker said.

"Hell, yes!" grunted Dirk Garth, the bigger of the two hard-case brothers. "It's him dealt himself in on that job yesterday, and last night traded lead with Ed and me and Tallant, and put this nick in my arm."

Cameron saw the bandage covering on hairy, muscled forearm, and remembered the cry of pain that had answered one of his bullets last night.

"Then it's time we put an end to play acting," said Decker, "and get down to cases." There was grim mockery in his smile. He had Cameron's gun shoved behind his waistband, his own in his hand and leveled. "You needr't have been in this spot," he told Rod, "but you would meddle, and start asking questions, and it wasn't safe to go on the way I planned." He jerked his head at the other Garth brother. "Get up from there, Ed."

Decker shoved Cameron into the chair behind the desk that Ed vacated. He dragged a sheet of paper in front of the prisoner, placed a pen and heavy inkwell beside it.

"What's that for?" grunted Cameron, as if he didn't already know.

"You're to write a letter to the Chicago office," Decker told him. "Just as I dictate it to you—a complete approval of my request for funds!"

INSTEAD, Rod Cameron placed both hands palm down on the crude desk and leaned back, his eyes cold and unafraid as they met Decker's. "And after that I disappear somewhere on the trail back to Montana—is that it? This fits in well with all the scheming you've done these past three years."

Decker lifted an eyebrow, shot a look at the cadaverous Orin Tallant. "Pretty sharp, ain't he?" He looked back at Cameron, lips twisting. "Suppose you just tell me something about those schemes."

"Took me a little time to figure it out," admitted Rod. All at once he knew he had to keep talking, because as soon as that letter was written and signed, the game would be up with

him, whereas by stalling he might be able to wait for a break. "I was thrown for a spell when I found the tracks of just one saddle horse at the scene of yesterday's stickup. Naturally that bronc hadn't carried double, and yet I couldn't see how both the Garth brothers could have ridden the hijacked load to Hood River and been back to the settlement by evening.

"The answer, of course, was that the apples never went to Hood River! But I didn't catch on—not even the burning crates in that bonfire I saw up there yesterday set me straight—until I remembered the freight wagon that passed me on the way down to the valley road. It was going out with the tarp strapped down, just like a load of apples headed for market. But the way it jounced over those holes in the road, it could only have been empty!"

The lids of Decker's eyes had drawn down a little, veiling his cold stare. "So what did you gather from that?"

"Why, that the rig was being moved into position for another hijack attempt this morning! These robberies began a few weeks ago—about the time you got word I was being sent to look into your affairs. Of course everyone thought the stolen apples went to Hood River markets. Instead, you had them brought here and stored yonder in the shed, after burning the crates, simply in order to make me think you had a bumper crop on your hands and a full crew working!" Rod shook his head. "When did you first know this fine, big hilltop orchard of yours was dying, Clint?"

"All right, smart boy," the other grunted. "It was two years ago, if you want to know. The tops of the trees began to wither on me, and the harvest dropped to nothing. But nobody caught on because I've kept strangers out, and the trees on the lower slopes still look all right. Mean-

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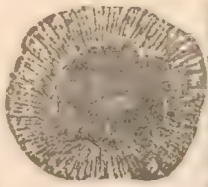

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while I've been shipping fruit in from the Willamette Valley and reselling it at Hood River. Only this year the apples haven't arrived yet, and I had to find some when I learned you were on your way. So I stole them!"

"I suppose the tree roots finally hit that hardpan everybody knew was bound to kill them, sooner or later," Cameron speculated. He added, "I'd like to have had a look at your books, Decker, to see how you covered up all this dirty work you were doing with association funds!"

"Another season," boasted Decker, "and I think my plans will work out." He stabbed a finger at the paper in front of Cameron. "Your letter will get me the money I need. Tallant here, acting as my front man, will make the deals to buy out these two-bit fruit growers when they're persuaded to give up. Then I step free, leave Western Development to do what they like with their hill full of dead trees, and set up in business for myself. A prospect like that's worth a few years to work it out, don't you think so?"

"No question of it," Cameron admitted drily, and he made no effort to conceal his contempt.

"Well—start writing!"

Rod Cameron shrugged resignedly, leaned forward, and picked up the pen. Decker began to dictate. Cameron wrote slowly, forming each letter with care.

AT FIRST every eye watched him. But as the moments dragged out, Decker's voice droning on in the stillness, this grew monotonous for the other three. Cameron, glancing up surreptitiously, saw that Orin Tallant had fallen to studying his long, yellowish fingernails; Dirk Garth was monkeying with the bandage of his hurt arm. After a bit the second brother pushed up from his chair and prowled over to a window.

Rod Cameron went tense. This would be the time—Clint Decker, sure of himself and engrossed in

composition, had let the gun sag until its barrel pointed more at the floor than at his prisoner. Rod decided to wait until the pen went dry again, and then he would reach as though for more ink, seize the heavy inkwell, and fling it at Decker's head. A desperately long chance.

A cry from Ed Garth, at the window, broke in on his thoughts: "What do you suppose is goin' on out there?"

Every head jerked up—and Rod Cameron waited no longer. Decker had half turned away and before he could get around again, the prisoner was lurching up from his chair, straight at him. One shoulder rammed into the man's belly, driving him backward, as Rod groped for the gun in Decker's hand.

They struck the floor with Decker underneath, the wind knocked out of him. Shouts from the others in the room, and Dirk Garth was coming with a gun sliding into his meaty palm. Leaping the fallen chair, he reached to strike at Cameron, drag him off Decker's body. But Cameron had the gun from Decker's limp fingers and was twisting about with it. He tripped the trigger instinctively.

Garth, almost on top of him, halted in midstride as though jerked back by a heavy blow. He spun about, dropped solidly. On his knees now, Rod looked through gunsmoke and saw Ed Garth whirling from the window, and Orin Tallant snaking a bony hand out from under his coat with a snub-nosed hideout gun in it. And somewhere outside the office, there was a mingling of shouts, and many guns had suddenly begun sounding.

Cameron dropped Tallant with his second bullet, seeing the man fold and hit limply against the desk. Another clap of room-trapped thunder broke then, and pain skewered Cameron in a fiery streak along his upper arm. Lead knocked him sideward, his shoulder striking heavily

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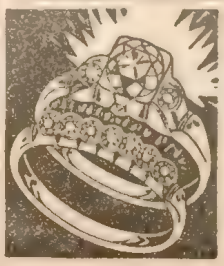

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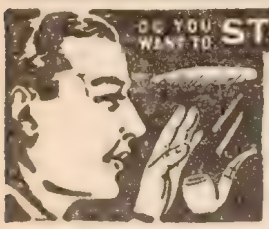

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against the rough pine boards of the wall at his back. Ed Garth, across the room, was lining for another shot. Somehow Rod Cameron got his own gun up, got his bullet over first.

Outside, the shooting had built to a wild crescendo. Rod pushed a little shakily to his feet. On the floor beside him the winded Clint Decker was stirring and gasping for breath Rod leaned quickly, got his own weapon from where it was stuffed behind the man's waistband. He rolled Decker over, laid a gun barrel across the back of his neck and saw him go limp. That would take care of Decker. With a gun in each hand Cameron turned and ran for the door, wrenched it open.

A wild sight greeted him. In a swirl of dust and confusion, mounted men had swept in upon the shed, and Decker's crew was giving battle. Shots boomed hollowly under the low roof, and there was the pound of hoofs, the sound of feet running. A bronc with empty saddle went past Rod Cameron, stirrups flying; then he was down the steps and hurrying toward the shed with his two guns ready. But before he could reach there, the fight was already ending.

Stephen James came spurring toward him, hat gone, a smear of blood across one cheek where a slug had grazed. He held a smoking rifle in one hand, and when he saw Cameron he came down from saddle quickly.

"You bad hurt?" he demanded, catching sight of the bullet streak on Cameron's arm. When Rod shook his head to this James went on. "Nobody molested that shipment, and we didn't know whether you'd been mistaken, or the hijackers might have changed their plans. You said you were coming here, and I got uneasy and persuaded the rest we ought to see you weren't in trouble. The shooting in the office started just as we got here, and then that gang in the shed opened up, and we had to

take care of them before helping you."

"Well, you got your hijackers, then," grunted Cameron. "And Clint Decker will stand trial for embezzlement and robbery. The harm he did can't be undone, but at any rate you people will have no more trouble, and Western Development can absorb its share of the losses."

James was shaking his head, one hand thrown up to stop him. "Wait a minute, now! Begin at the beginning—"

"This is no place to talk," the younger man objected. "Too much confusion, and there's too much to be told. Besides," he added, grinning suddenly, "looks like we need your daughter Susan about now. We both got bullet streaks to be patched up."

Stephen James began to grin, too. "You should have heard Sue talking about you this morning! You wouldn't have notions of taking our girl away from us, to Montana, now would you?"

"Well, that," said Rod seriously, "is something that will just have to work itself out."

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If you suffer with attacks of Asthma and choke and gasp for breath, if restful sleep is difficult because of the struggle to breathe, don't fail to send at once to the Frontier Asthma Company for a FREE trial of the FRONTIER ASTHMA MEDICINE, a preparation for temporary symptomatic relief of paroxysms of Bronchial Asthma. No matter where you live or whether you have faith in any medicine under the sun, send today for this free trial. It will cost you nothing. Caution! Use only as directed. Address

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This new 128-page book, "Stammering, Its Cause and Correction," describes the Bogue Unit Method for scientific correction of stammering and stuttering—successful for 46 years. Benj. J. Bogue, Dept. 5633, Circle Tower, Indianapolis 4, Ind.

Clothing Bargains For All

Used clothing. Cleaned and repaired. Some may need minor adjustments.

DRESSES, sizes 12-20 — 6 for $3.25

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SIMULATED DIAMONDS
THE PERFECT BRIDAL PAIR
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Exquisite Solitaire Engagement and Wedding Rings set with brilliant flashing simulated diamonds! Choice of Genuine Sterling Silver or Gold Plate! Perfect reproductions of expensive diamond rings! A sensational value for these rings of breathtaking richness and beauty! No other rings like them. ORDER NOW!

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BUY and KEEP U. S. SAVINGS BONDS

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BOYS!
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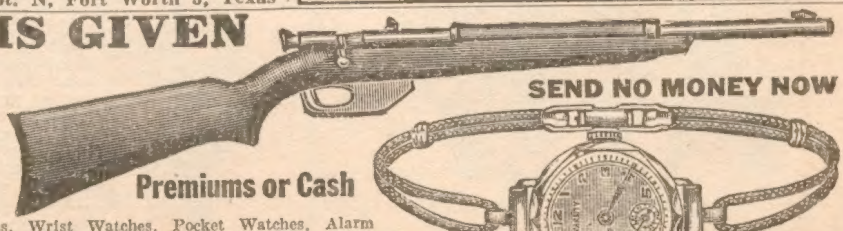

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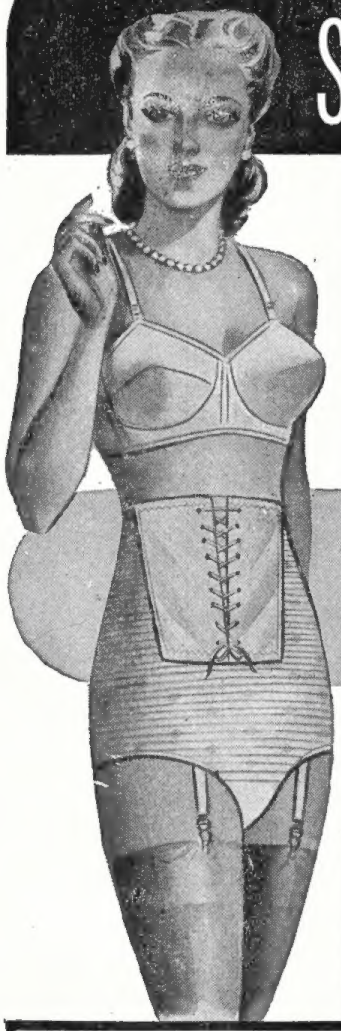
Genuine Hoban 22 cal. Rifles, Wrist Watches, Pocket Watches, Alarm Clocks, Blankets, Towels, Record Players, Dolls, Footballs—Other premiums or Cash Commission easily yours, etc. SIMPLY GIVE colorful art pictures with White CLOVERINE Brand SALVE for chaps and mild burns easily sold to friends and neighbors at 25 cents a box (with beautiful picture) and remit amount called for under premium wanted in catalog sent with order postage paid by us. Our 52nd year. Be first! Write for trial order Salve and pictures sent on trust to start. WILSON CHEMICAL CO., Dept. 104-66, TYRONE, PA.

If YOU Want to Enjoy That SLIM-'TEEN SIZE feeling..



Does a bulging tummy make you look years older than you really are? Are ordinary girdles uncomfortable to wear . . . do they fail to flatten out your abdomen the way you want? Then here at last is the answer to your problem! SLIM-MODE, the wonderful new adjustable health supporter girdle is scientifically constructed to help you look and feel like a "Slim Sixteen".

So why go on day after day with a tired back that needs posture support to bring relief? Why look droopy and beyond your years because your mid-section bulges and your clothes don't fit right? Read below why SLIM-MODE brings you vital control where you need it most . . . how it helps to "harmonize" your figure to more stylish lines . . . why it's so comfortable to wear. And remember, you can have a SLIM-MODE sent to you to wear on FREE TRIAL. See our offer in the coupon.

The Adjustable SLIM-MODE HEALTH SUPPORTER GIRDLE

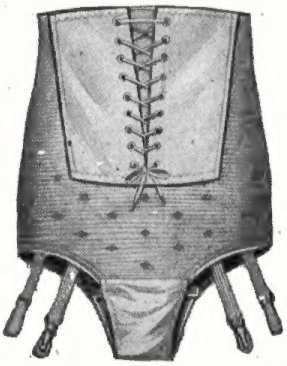
LIFTS AND FLATTENS YOUR BULGING TUMMY

SLIM-MODE has a built-in front-laced panel. Adjust the laces to your own greatest comfort. Your tummy is lifted in to shape, flattened out . . . yet you feel truly comfortable.

NATURALLY CONTROLLED STRETCH

SLIM-MODE is made of two-way S-t-r-e-t-c-h wonder cloth—it stretches as you breathe, bend, stoop, after meals, etc.

JUST PUT IT ON — PRESTO! *You look INCHES SLIMMER...you feel wonderfully COMFORTABLE*



HEALTHFUL, ENJOYABLE FIGURE CONTROL *ALL DAY LONG!*

You can wear SLIM-MODE all day long. Will not bind or make you feel constricted. That's because the two-way s-t-r-e-t-c-h cloth plus the front-laced panel brings you perfect *personalized* fit. The design of SLIM-MODE is based on scientific facts of healthful figure control. Made by experts of quality materials. Comes with detachable crotch of rayon satin material; also 4 detachable garters. (Remove garters when not wearing stockings.) Color: Nude. All sizes. Only $3.98 in regular sizes. Sent on Free Trial. Give measurements asked for in coupon.

FREE "Magic" Plastic Laces. For your extra added comfort you get a pair of Plastic laces that stretch gently as needed. Try them in SLIM-MODE instead of regular laces. See which you prefer.

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SEND NO MONEY *YOU TRY IT BEFORE YOU BUY IT!*

RONNIE SALES, INC., Dept. G-2510
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Send me for 10 days' FREE TRIAL a SLIM-MODE. I will pay postman $3.98 (plus postage) (sizes 38 and over $4.98) with the understanding that this payment is only my evidence of good faith and is not to be considered a final purchase unless I decide to keep the garment. In 10 days I will either return SLIM-MODE to you and you will return my money, or otherwise my payment will be a full and final purchase price.

My waist measure is..... Hips are.....
My height is.....

Name .....
Address .....
City & Zone .....State.....

☐ **Save Money. We pay postage if you enclose payment now. Same FREE TRIAL and refund privilege.**

No Canadian or Foreign C.O.D.'s

Men! Ladies! Here's THE JACKET You've Wanted At A Sensational Saving!

LADIES'—You'll Love It!

Take this jacket for carefree ease—and for that certain poise which being "in the know" on style gives you! That new low hipline is a "flash" from the fashion front. Perky shoulders! Suave yoke! You will adore its smart distinctive lines . . . you will always enjoy its caressing warmth. It's tailored of favorite Spun-Rite, justly popular for its wear . . . for its beauty! It will be your prop and mainstay, season in, season out. Select yours from one of these seasons latest shades: Camel Tan or Liberty Red. Sizes 12 to 20.

MEN'S — Ideal for Sports-Leisure

Here's a sturdy "he-man's" jacket of a thousand and one uses that will keep pace with the fastest tempo of your busy day. Cut for real comfort—of "Spun-Rite"—magically flexible, smoothly tailored and colorful as well as warm. Snappy yoked back. Harmonizing buttons for looks and wear. Grand, deep, saddlepockets. Seamed sides—so stride along as you will. You'll live in it from dawn 'til night. Choose Camel Tan with the following choice of harmonizing colors: Forest Green or Luggage Brown. Check your size from 34 to 50 on the order coupon below.

Ladies! Men! Here's the Jacket "buy" you've been waiting for. Here's quality, style, comfort and durability all combined in one to give you the finest, smartest jacket you'll find anywhere, regardless of price. And when you order the two together — one lady's and one man's jacket—you get two jackets for only $7.95.

Save 95c! Everyone — wife and husband, girl-friend and beau will want to order matching jackets in combination on this special bargain offer. You SEND NO MONEY! We'll ship C.O.D. plus a few cents postage. If you don't agree this is the greatest Jacket Bargain you've ever seen for the price, return it within 10 days and your money will be cheerfully refunded.

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Just Fill Out and Mail This Handy Order Coupon Today

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Gentlemen: Send me the SPUN-RITE Jackets indicated below C.O.D. I must be fully satisfied with my purchase or will return within 10 days for refund.

Name ..... Please
Address ..... write
City ..... State ..... plainly

LADY'S JACKET Sale Price $3.95	Camel Tan	Liberty Red
Check color wanted		

Combination Price for 1 Man's & 1 Lady's Jacket Both only $7.95

MEN'S JACKET Sale Price $4.95	Camel Tan with these colors	Luggage Brown	Forest Green
Check color wanted			

CHECK SIZES WANTED
LADY'S 12☐, 14☐, 16☐, 18☐, 20☐ MAN'S 36☐, 38☐, 40☐, 42☐ 44☐, 46☐, 48☐, 50☐

MY TOTAL PURCHASE AMOUNTS TO: $.....C. O. D.